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A STIFF-NECKED GENERATION



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A

STIFF-NECKED GENERATION

BY

L. B. WALFORD

AUTHOR OF 'TROUBLESOME DAUGHTERS,' 'MR SMITH: A PART
OF HIS LIFE,' 'PAULINE,' 'COUSINS,' 'THE BABY'S
GRANDMOTHER,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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CONTENTS OF THE THIRD VOLUME.

CHAP.	PAGE
XXVII. A HOST ENJOYING HIMSELF, . . .	1
XXVIII. UNCERTAINTY, . . .	28
XXIX. GOOD FUN AT KING'S COMMON, . .	52
XXX. HAD ROSAMUND BEEN THERE! . . .	79
XXXI. HARTLAND'S MANŒUVRE, . . .	106
XXXII. THE TRUTH, . . .	134
XXXIII. "JILTED! IT'S AN UGLY WORD," . .	162
XXXIV. HARTLAND UNLIKE HIMSELF, . . .	187
XXXV. "PROMISE THAT YOU WILL BUT WAIT," .	209
XXXVI. LADY JULIA'S LITTLE PLAN, . . .	239
XXXVII. SHE HAS HAD HER LESSON, . . .	266

A STIFF-NECKED GENERATION.



CHAPTER XXVII.

A HOST ENJOYING HIMSELF.

“ If she laugh, and she chat,
Play, joke, and all that,
And with smiles and good-humour she meet me,
She’s like a rich dish
Of venison, or fish,
That cries from the table, ‘Come eat me!’ ”
—ANON.

“ BUT, dear me ! this is very awkward, Rosamund’s not coming home to dinner,” quoth Rosamund’s papa, when informed of what had happened. “ Not coming home at all to-night, is she ? ”

Major Gilbert, to whom the inquiry was put, made answer in the negative ; and then

hastily explaining — for he was pressed for time — that he was himself obliged to be absent likewise, he made for the door, before his astonished host could collect himself for anything further.

“Dear me! this is really very awkward,” proceeded Mr Liscard, reflecting. “I wish one or other of them had been here. I — really — upon my word, what am I to do? Am I to entertain these young ladies all by myself? Am I to be obliged to talk to them during the whole of dinner? And how in the world am I to know what to talk about? I must say if there is one thing I like, it is to eat my dinner in peace. Really this is very annoying. I do hope it is only for once and away: I do hope Rosamund will not do such a thing again. If there is any chance of its happening a second time, Hartland must come over, or the Stonebys, or somebody. I cannot undertake to have these Miss Gilberts here, and nobody to attend to them. They should never have been invited, if this was to be

the way. Their brother making off too, just when he could have been useful ! The whole thing has been very badly managed." And the meek man, who would never have presumed to lift up his little finger on his own behalf in the days of his imperious spouse, was now quite creditably peevish, and stood upon his rights like any other middle-aged head of a house.

It will thus be seen that he had come on during his widowerhood.

He had indeed astonished everybody, and none more than himself ; for those days of mourning had, to speak the truth roundly, been the most peaceful and congenial he had passed for many a long year.

He had been, as was only natural, shocked and distressed by the tragical event which had left him a widower, and it had taken full eight-and-forty hours for him to collect his ideas, and feel the new ground whereon he stood.

But that accomplished, almost simultane-

ously there had breathed throughout his soul a spirit of sweet resignation, and an indistinct and novel sense of importance.

Never in the course of his whole married life had he been made of consequence to anybody — he was now *the* person of the house.

His wishes, his desires were paramount as regarded all arrangements to be made, and the slightest hint that dropped from his lips was acted upon forthwith.

To him were condolences primarily offered, and letters of sympathy addressed; for, in the eye of the world, he must presumably stand out second to none in the august affliction which had overtaken the august family.

It might have been a little troublesome — for so high a position had its responsibilities — but he could not well at such a period have otherwise occupied himself. His treatise on Kant would have had to wait at any rate until after the funeral day; and previous to it, he would not even, as we know, unpack

the new books, although the box had actually got as far as the niche in the library sacred to such arrivals.

That being the case, he would have been sadly at a loss had the vacuum remained unfilled, so that it had seemed quite the right thing for the steward to come to him with suggestions, Lord Hartland with reminders, and Mr Stoneby with the programme of the burial service.

He had really had little to do beyond putting as it were his seal upon each and all of these : Rosamund had written the bulk of his letters, the servants among them managed the household business, and Lady Julia had proved an authority on the outlay expected in the way of mourning. As one and all had matured their own ideas before submitting them for his sanction, it could not have been called severe mental labour which the demands occasioned, and they had brought with them a gentle variety of interest which at such a juncture had been rather

welcome than otherwise. His own tailor had, moreover, made him the most comfortable and well-fitting suit he had had for a long time ; and when he had discovered this, in addition to the other amenities of his condition—and when he had slipped ‘ poor Caroline’s ’ wedding-ring upon his little finger, and found that it also fitted, and would require no troublesome alteration, poor Caroline herself would have opened her eyes could she have beheld the swiftness with which her bereaved one was accommodating himself to his loss.

It may indeed have been questioned whether matters would have been quite so smooth, had Rosamund not been taken up with her own affairs at this time.

We are inclined to think that had there been no Major Gilbert, no recent betrothal and new-found remorse mingling with the natural shock of distress, a push for the leading rein would have been made from that quarter. But Rosamund had been bewildered,

amazed, and immersed in self-consciousness, and the one thing clear to her at the moment had been the duty which she owed her single remaining parent. Moreover, it had been a relief to turn to his wants and needs, and fancy them greater than they were, and exaggerate his grief, and presume that he was a sufferer. She had chosen to consider that he and she were in unison, and that no deference nor attention was too great to be shown to one so afflicted. It had been her best way of silencing Gilbert, and making him uncomfortable—that was the truth; but naturally of this her father could not be aware, and, as a result, it had been perhaps with her more than with any one else that he had tasted the sweets of consequence.

That she should now desert him was therefore what he had little expected; and he had by this time become so used to his advance in public estimation all round, that he was quite equal to being aggrieved thereby.

Here were Major Gilbert's sisters, nice young

people, likely to make the house more cheerful, give him a little music of an evening, and require nothing of him beyond an arm for the elder in to dinner—here they were all at once to be thrown on his hands entirely! He had had no sort of objection to their coming; he had been quite pleased to have them, and they had been easy and sociable during the preceding evening, and had made altogether a favourable impression,—but that was not to say he was ready to have them for his guests, when not a single other member of the family was present.

It was downright inconsiderate of Rosamund; and as for Gilbert, he could as well have stayed as not,—and in this humour he descended to the drawing-room.

Immediate relief, however, awaited him there.

In the easiest lounging-chair by the fire, arrayed in her new, black, evening frock, her hair elaborately drawn up and arranged—(she had prevailed on her maid to do it, fearless

of exposure, now that her eldest sister was disposed of, and Dolly tongue-tied by connivance)—there sat Miss Catharine Liscard, the very picture of cool, prim composure.

“I knew that you could not do without me to-night, papa;” on his entrance he was thus accosted. “I made haste, so as to be down in time to help you with the visitors. They will be ready directly. But they were rather late in going to their rooms.”

“Are you going to dine?” inquired her father, immensely relieved. “By the way, you did dine yesterday, did you not?” Until now the recollection of this had escaped him.

“Yes, papa. And I think I had better dine as long as the Miss Gilberts are here, for it would be so uncomfortable for you to have them all by yourself,” rejoined the astute miss, with commendable grasp of the situation. “You could not possibly be left without *some one*, and as we do not know how long poor Rosamund may be away——”

——“Dear me! what do you mean, child? Not know how long Rosamund may be away!”

“Or even that she will be able to sit up to dinner, when she does come back,” proceeded Catharine, deliberately; “and if that is to be the way”—and she glanced at him with a glance which meant—“if that is to be the way, here am I, equal to anything, and perfectly competent to fill any one’s place.”

Apparently, however, Mr Liscard did not see it. “Who told you this?” he demanded, discomfited anew. “Who said that Rosamund would not be able to come home to-morrow? She is merely passing the night at her aunt’s, as she has often done before.”

“Aunt Julia told Emily that she did not at all expect that Rosamund would be able to return to-morrow,” began Catharine; “Emily will tell you herself what Aunt Julia said,” as Miss Gilbert entered; “here she comes, papa, and you can ask her.”

“I am exceedingly sorry that this should have happened on the very first day of your

visit, Miss Gilbert," said her host, who was not deficient in old-fashioned politeness; "I don't know what my daughter has been about, I am sure. They tell me she has been overdoing herself; but she never was a delicate girl, and I don't think it can be that. She looked as well and bright as anybody yesterday evening. I remarked to myself that I had not seen her so like her old self for many weeks. Your and your sister's coming had seemed to do her good directly," he added, gallantly.

"I have no doubt it will soon pass off," replied Emily Gilbert, "and it was such a good thing that it happened in the house, and not out of doors. If Rosamund had been sitting up in Frederick's dog-cart, for instance, she might have had a terrible fall. And he had arranged for her to drive with him—only think! But we were all sitting quietly in the drawing-room, and so she was attended to directly, and was better, and trying to get a little sleep, before we left."

“And Aunt Julia had got Dr Makin,” added Catharine, who had already mastered all details.

“I am only so sorry it should have happened to spoil your day,” reiterated Mr Liscard, who, as we know, was not an anxious parent. “Upon my word, it is most unfortunate. I know my daughter had been arranging a number of little expeditions; she was most anxious to make your stay pleasant.”

“Oh, we shall be sure to find it pleasant, Mr Liscard.”

“And your brother to be obliged to run off too!” continued he, “when he dines with us almost every evening! I never, or at least hardly ever, knew him unable to remain before—certainly never when he was wanted—I mean especially wanted. However, we will do our best. Here is Catharine says she is to sit up for once——”

Catharine’s face fell. “For once,” indeed! And she had thought he had so entirely

accepted her as his ally and assistant ! For this—for a series of sittings up—she had planned and hoped, and had had her hair dressed like Rosamund's, and made herself look as old as ever a girl of sixteen could—and then to hear herself spoken of as though she were six !

In an agony now as to her right to head the table—that *Ultima Thule* of her imagination—she hastily interposed, “I am to take my sister's place for to - night, papa says. Papa must have some one to take her place,” she added, confidentially, to Emily ; “it would look so odd if no one sat at the other end of the table.”

“I daresay ! Put it on ‘papa,’” cried Mr Liscard, feeling that his way was being smoothed, and his spirits rising in consequence. “So you have left one of your number behind, I hear,” to Henrietta, who now entered. “I was just telling your sister that I consider it very bad manners on Rosamund's part to play you such a

trick. But if you do not mind—oh, there is dinner,” and he gave her his arm unsuspectingly, and even when the sisters looked at each other, visibly betraying his mistake, he did not alter it.

“What! Have I made a mistake?” he said; “but, upon my word, I do not think it was my fault. Miss Gilbert, I beg your pardon, and I shall place you on my right hand, so it will be all straight in the end, I think. We are a very small party to-night, certainly. Soho, Catharine! so you have stuck yourself up there, have you?” (Poor Catharine!) “You little impertinence,” added he, laughing, “I wonder what Rosamund would say if she saw you! Well, now, what soup is this?”

It chanced to be oyster-soup, and if there was one soup he loved above all others, that soup was before him. His satisfaction and cheerfulness increased with every mouthful. His young guests wondered how they had ever feared him, ever dreaded the meal; and

telegraphed to each other the termination of their doubts and fears. Even Rosamund's and Frederick's absence was atoned for by the new tone adopted by their host, and by the celerity with which he had thus come to the front; and, encouraged to be easy, their native assurance soon re-asserted itself, and their tongues ran fast.

"I do think they are rather free," internally commented demure Miss Catharine, who had also undergone a change since her promotion, and from being an anxious and insecure adherent fawning on the strangers, had become in her own eyes a sort of queen-regent for the time being, once she found herself in the coveted throne-chair to which Rosamund had succeeded on her mother's death. "They are actually chaffing papa, and making fun with him!" cried she to herself, in virtuous horror.

What was worse, papa was chaffing back, and laughing heartily.

The poor man was indeed little accustomed

to being amused at his own dinner-table. If his wife had been in good humour, she had prated of her own concerns, and had not cared a jot whether or no any one listened; if not, she had partaken of her food in morose silence. But in neither mood had any one else dreamed of leading the conversation; and although at the beginning of Rosamund's butterfly reign there had been some faint signs of better things, and her prattle had been tolerated, and had even won an occasional response and smile, the rift in the clouds had been of brief duration, and with the rise of Gilbert had come the fall of his champion.

It was therefore with a new sensation that the widower, long accustomed to sipping his sherry, and partaking of his soup, his fish, his mutton, and currant-jelly, down to the morsel of cheese his digestion permitted, in almost unbroken silence and with undivided attention, now found himself partaking of a second slice in the middle of a jest, and

quite inclined for a newly warmed plate and some fresh vegetables, since Emily Gilbert was so fond of seakale.

He was convinced it did him good to have his appetite thus provoked.

Surely it was a mistake to eat as a duty, and lack of conversation and mirth was apt to make the meal degenerate into a mere bolting of the food. His poor wife had never understood this, and who could say how much harm her taciturnity might not have done her? But women rarely had sense in such matters. And with these reflections, he racked his memory anew for fresh quotations, and pleasing anecdotes.

Miss Catharine's disapproving visage at the top of the table for some time escaped his notice, and when it could no longer do so, it merely inspired him with a sense of amusement. What did the silly thing mean, that she should presume to look like that at him? And why should she or any one suppose that he could not be agreeable and entertaining,

and produce some of his rich stores of learning for the benefit of an appreciative audience, as well as any other man? Clever men, brain-working men, such as himself, were the very people to be most delightful and instructive when they gave themselves up to being so. "That foolish girl little knows," thought he.

As for the young ladies on either side of him, he did not know when he had met with such nice, merry, unaffected lasses.

How much they had to say, and how nicely they said it! Not a bit shy. Evidently not at all bored. Before he was well done with the one, he would be attacked by the other; and whatever he said was applauded and agreed to by both. It came in the end to this, that he found himself half-way through a helping of rich steam-pudding—which he would as soon have flown as partaken of two months before — and vastly enjoying the sauce, without having once inquired into its ingredients!

He really did not know himself. But this he did know, that after partaking of such a reckless repast as he had never before in his life ventured upon, he found himself as light and comfortable as heart of man could desire. He flicked his napkin in Catharine's surly face as she filed past after the others, for whom he was gallantly holding open the door; he almost made a grimace at her behind her back. "Ridiculous puss! if she thinks to sit there and look sour at her own father, she is mistaken," cried he to himself; "that's the nuisance of daughters. But I shall certainly not put up with any nonsense from *her*. Back she shall hop, skip, and jump to Miss Penrose to-morrow, if she does not behave herself better—ay, even if Rosamund has to be still away. What odds? I can get on without either of them,"—and so openly did he show this, and so effectual were the few words presently whispered in the ear of the malcontent, that there was a swift curtailment of the young lady's long-

drawn face, and a re-arrangement of her ideas.

“Of course, if poor papa makes a point of it, poor papa ought certainly to be the first consideration,” Propriety counselled; “and anything would be better than being stopped dining to-morrow,” Truth slipped out, next.

There was also breakfast to be thought about. The schoolroom breakfast at King’s Common was over a full hour before the great gong sounded for the more elaborate repast of the elders, and the mysteries of the latter had never once been unclosed to Catharine’s yearning vision. Here was her opportunity. By playing her cards well, she need hardly doubt but that permission would be granted for that most coveted post of all—the seat behind the massive silver tea and coffee pots; whereas, on the contrary, if she should receive another “What are you thinking about? You are no good at all. We might as well be without you, unless you exert yourself to

be more agreeable,"—it would be the death-blow of all her hopes.

Without a parent's express permission she durst not absent herself from the eight-o'clock breakfast and appear at the other. Dinner had been another matter. At that hour the sway of Miss Penrose had of late been relaxed, indeed altogether suspended, and once downstairs, her pupils had considered themselves escaped from her jurisdiction. But Miss Penrose was not a person to be braved with impunity during the time of her lawful authority; and the recollection of this speedily put an end to all Catharine's elegant scruples, and made her on principle as vivacious as anybody.

Such being the case, she could, ere the evening closed, put forth the morrow's claim, and indulgence being granted, her cup was full.

But though this was all very well for the nonce, it was an unnatural state of things, and one which could not go on, and two questions were agitating the breasts of all ere the next

day ended : the first being naturally as to whether Rosamund were or were not ill enough to be long detained from her home ; the second, regarding the Miss Gilberts and their visit.

They had come avowedly to make friends with their future connections, their brother's affianced wife in particular ; could it be necessary for them under such circumstances to feel *de trop* ? On the other hand, was it in accordance with etiquette that they should remain at King's Common without a hostess, and throughout the day left to their own devices ?

To decamp in hot haste because Rosamund was suffering from a feverish attack, seemed, however, somewhat unreasonable.

“ Good Lord ! ” cried Gilbert, “ what are you thinking of ? ”

“ But then,” responded Miss Emily, “ we don't quite know what to do with ourselves, brother.”

“ Do with yourselves ? How ? I should have thought that you might have found

plenty to do. Go about and see the place; go over to the Abbey——”

“It is not that, Frederick. Of course there is plenty to be done; but it does feel so odd, and somehow as if we had no right to be doing it. We don’t feel as if we had any business anywhere.”

“And we have been alone ever since breakfast,” chimed in Henrietta; “for although Catharine was with us then, she said she had to go off directly afterwards, and we have not seen her again. And we did think of going over to call on Lady Julia, but we did not quite like——”

“Not like! Not like to go over to Julia! What nonsense! Nobody minds Julia. And I had counted on your having been at the Abbey, so I came here first. Why, bless my soul! I thought you would have been sure to go. I’ll answer for it your places were laid for luncheon there. I made sure you would have asked after Rosamund the first thing.”

“So we did—at least Mr Liscard did. A groom was sent over this morning.”

“Well?”

“She had passed a restless night, but was no worse. However, she was to be kept perfectly quiet, and Lady Julia would let us know how she was, later on. Nothing was said about our going over there.”

“Hum! Oh, well, perhaps it was as well you didn’t go, then. But *I* shall go. I shall ride round presently. I did not bring the dog-cart to-day, as none of you would go in it yesterday.”

“Oh, Frederick!”

“You would not. You preferred that old arm-chair of a chaise.”

“Frederick, you know why; it was because we had been promised to go round by the mill-stream and see the place where—you know”—and the affectionate sisters each looked the rest.

“Oh, that was it, was it? And you could not wait? Well, now about your stopping

on. Of course you must stop on, now that you have come. It would never do to sneak back the way you came, before you were well out of sight. I don't want it all over the place at home that Rosamund is delicate either—mind that, both of you. We must manage somehow," ruminating. "You say you get on well with the old gentleman?"

"Oh dear, yes; as well as possible. He is so kind, and really quite lively and talkative now. He is going to show us all his books and things. But you know, Frederick, he only appears at meal-times, and to-day he has not even done that at luncheon. He explained that this was the day of some meeting at Longminster, and it was to be his first appearance at it."

"I know. It is always on a Wednesday."

"So we two had to sit up in state in that great, huge dining-room," said Etta, her blue eyes growing round at the remembrance. "Think of Em and me seated there, being waited on by those three tremendously fine

men-servants, and solemnly going through all the courses! Brother, it was *dreadful*," and her voice sank to a whisper.

Frederick laughed superior. "My dear children, you would soon get used to it. Rosamund sits up all alone, I believe, and would not care a hang if there were thirty to wait on her."

"Does she? But no; I should never get used to it," said Etta. Em was silent, for she was beginning to think that for her part she could.

"I suppose if you had Catharine you would be all right?" inquired their brother, presently.

"Oh dear, yes; her, or any one. It is the being just our two selves, with no one else at all—not one single member of the family——"

"Even a dog or a cat would be an addition," said Frederick; "is that it?"

"So that we need not rack our brains for something to converse solemnly about. You cannot think, Frederick, how terrible it is to have regularly to *converse* with each other,

when we dare not say a single thing we want to say."

"It does sound rather bad. Well, the only thing for it that I see," said he, "is for me to go to old Penrose—old Penrose will do anything for me—and beg her to give Catharine holidays in advance of the others. The Christmas holidays must be on before long, and I don't think she could refuse. I don't suppose Rosamund would mind," he added, more doubtfully; for he was learning not to take Rosamund's acquiescence for granted even in very simple matters. "It really seems the only thing to be done," he concluded. "Come, we'll go for a stroll now, and I'll tackle the governess afterwards."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

UNCERTAINTY.

“Uncertainty !

Fell demon of our fears ! The human soul
That can support despair, supports not thee.”

—MALLET.

ON the abrupt termination of the luncheon-party at the Abbey, the three Miss Waterfields had walked off with Mr Stoneby and his sister, Emily and Henrietta Gilbert having been disposed off in the pony-carriage, and their brother having flown for medical aid. He had constituted himself Lady Julia's messenger, since no one else, he was sure, would go so fast, or get to the village so soon ; and, all anxiety and activity, had been off ere she could say “ Yes ” or “ No.”

The absence of the entire Gilbert family was far from unwelcome to the walkers. The Waterfields were dying to know what the Stonebys thought, while the Stonebys were equally on the tenter-hooks to learn the impressions received by the Waterfields. The latter had seen nothing of Major Gilbert as an engaged man, the former scarcely anything of him in any other capacity. His sisters were new to all alike.

In consequence, the four females were thirsting to discuss the matter in all its bearings; while even Jack, though but little was to be looked for from him in the way of contribution, was nothing loath to hear what others had to tell.

"I had forgotten that you knew anything of Major Gilbert," began Clementina, bravely taking the first plunge; "it took me by surprise to hear him say 'Miss Violet' so glibly."

"That is one of Major Gilbert's little ways," said Violet, drily. "He is very particular

about giving each one of us our Christian name, and never misses an opportunity. You saw he had but half a minute for his 'Miss Violet,' and it would have been 'Miss Eleanour' the next, but that his eye fell on Rosamund fainting in Eleanour's arms."

"It must have been very alarming for you, Eleanour," said Clemmy; "but I own I, for my part, was not surprised. Rosamund has been so strange for some time, so odd and irritable and——" she just remembered to pause before another adjective slipped out. She did not wish the suggestion of unhappiness to come from her.

"She felt her mother's death exceedingly," observed the rector, coming to the rescue.

"It must certainly have been a great shock," added Miss Waterfield. But they all knew it was not Lady Caroline they were thinking about.

"I like Major Gilbert," said Clementina, abruptly. Even Jack started. He had been hastily running over in his mind something

neat and vague which should sound to Gilbert's credit, and yet which should not compromise his own conscience, but the four plain words of his little truthful sister somewhat took him aback; and, unable to endorse them himself, he listened breathlessly for some one of the other three to make the almost necessary response.

But there was a long, awkward silence before at length Eleanour Waterfield began. "Perhaps I ought not to say it, and I am sure I would not be unkind to Rosamund for the world, for you know what very old friends of the Liscards we are; and, indeed, it is just because we think so much of them all, that we do feel Major Gilbert is fortunate beyond his deserts. He may be very well as an acquaintance—he is certainly good-looking, and, I suppose, clever; but we—we cannot quite reconcile ourselves to the idea of him as Rosamund's husband."

"He will make a very good husband," said Clemmy, bluntly.

“Certainly—but not for her. Oh, I dare say he is really a worthy man”—(no one could help laughing)—“pshaw! what is the use of talking?” cried Miss Waterfield; “we all know what I mean. And those sisters! My dear Clementina, you saw the sisters.”

“His sisters are not *him*.”

“They are a part of him. No man can so separate himself from his belongings as not in a measure to rise and fall with them. Major Gilbert’s family must presently become Rosamund’s also; and how will Rosamund—Rosamund, with her proud, quick spirit, and all that unsparing judgment which made Lady Caroline so much feared, and which would make Rosamund equally so but that she has a dear, warm heart underneath it all—but still, I say, Clementina, how will she ever endure those dreadful girls?”

“She—I don’t know, upon my word,” cried Clemmy, suddenly bursting into ringing laughter. “That, Eleanour, I really,

really do not know. Oh, I cannot help it, I cannot help it! Oh, I am very cruel, I ought not to laugh; but it was when you said that, Eleanour, that Rosamund's face rose up before me—Rosamund's face as it was turned now on one sister, now on the other, just as you walked up the room. It was almost grotesque, the expression of calm despair with which she regarded them. I do not think they annoyed her. The case was too desperate. No; we must give up the sisters. As to the brother——” but here the tongues of all were let loose; and as our readers may form a tolerable guess as to what next passed, we need not trouble them with a detailed account.

Mr Stoneby alone endeavoured from time to time to check the current, and at the last his final words did receive some attention. “There is one thing,” he said very gravely, “before we part let us all agree to remember; we are Rosamund Liscard's friends, and whatever we may think or say among ourselves re-

garding her engagement, we must one and all feel bound to——”

“Oh, to hold our tongues about it to other people, of course,” said Clementina, briskly.

“Never to mention—never to allow it to be gathered from us that we entertain any doubts of her future happiness. She has made her choice—God grant it prove a happy one!” he broke off abruptly, and all felt they were on new ground.

“I am sure you are right, Mr Stoneby,” said Eleanour Waterfield, very respectfully, “and we shall all observe what you say. Good-bye,” and as she shook hands she did not look into Jack’s face, nor seemed to have observed anything in his tone, but to herself she commented, “Yes; I was right. I always thought so. Poor Mr Stoneby. And he would have been a great deal better than Major Gilbert, at all events.”

“And you say the sisters were actually worse than he!” cried Mrs Waterfield, who

was not of course to be reckoned among the excluded public, from whom the real sentiments of the chosen few were to be veiled. "But I do not know why we should be surprised at that. The eldest son of people of that sort is certain to have had advantages over the rest, and our first impression of Major Gilbert was not altogether unfavourable. I can quite believe he is the best of his set. Probably the only difference, the only real difference, we should now find between him and his sisters would be, that with the one the gloss has worn off, and with the others it never was on."

"Besides, he is handsomer than they," said Eleanour.

"And he is a man," added Violet.

"Very true," observed their mother, sententially. "As Violet says, he is a man, and what is bad in a man is worse in a woman. Major Gilbert's manners——"

——"Think of them intensified!" cried Eleanour. "Think of Major Gilbert's voice

trebled ! Think of Major Gilbert's self vulgarised ! ”

There was a general cry of “Impossible ! ” and she was felt to have been quite smart.

“ You should have seen them pressing round poor Rosamund, tearing off her jacket and necktie, unbuttoning her collar, and the one calling to the other to take off her boots and rub her feet ”—said Eleanour, in a tone of disgust, for she had taken Lady Julia's and not Hartland's view of the assistance rendered —“ it was altogether such a scene ! Sorry as I felt for Rosamund, I never was more thankful than when it was over. And how she would have disliked it herself, poor child ! ”

“ I shall have to call upon them, however,” concluded Mrs Waterfield, who would not have been human if her curiosity had not been somewhat aroused by all this. “ I must not neglect any of the customary civilities, more especially as Rosamund, if she is already ashamed of her new connections, will be quick to look out for them ; ” and accordingly she

ordered her carriage, and set forth for King's Common on the following day.

"Miss Liscard not going to return to-day?" she exclaimed, in some surprise, when informed of this. "Is it anything really serious then, Badeley?" for the butler was an old friend, and had himself advanced to the carriage window. "Not scarlatina, nor anything of that nature, is it?"

"I believe not, ma'am. I have not heard anything of the kind."

"A nervous attack, I was told," proceeded Mrs Waterfield. "I had certainly thought she would have returned by this time," and she mused doubtfully. How about going in? She had not asked as yet for any one else. Should she do so?

"Major Gilbert and the young ladies are walking in the garden, ma'am," said the old man, presently, and by the remark committing her to nothing. If she did not care to have the major and the young ladies summoned in, well and good, she had merely to hand him

her card, and no one would be the wiser ; if, on the contrary, it was her desire to alight, he had given her the opportunity of doing so.

“ I suppose we had better ? ” the lady turned to her daughter. “ We will come in, then, Badeley,” for in Eleanour’s countenance there was a prompt assent, and the two entered.

If ever a presence-chamber plainly showed a change of dynasty, it was that into which the visitors were now ushered. Not only was there no longer the formal figure at the far end, but the davenport itself had been wheeled aside ; a disused sofa had emanated from some hidden corner, and now claimed a prominent position in front of the hearth-rug ; chairs and tables, instead of being arranged precisely, as of yore, were placed hither and thither ; books that had been neatly laid one on the top of the other, bore signs of recent inspection and disturbance ; while work baskets and boxes, whose contents protruded, seemed to be everywhere ; footstools, apparently freshly used, strewn the hearth ; a couple of railway

novels lay open, face downwards, among the sofa cushions ; and the piano was littered with music.

The whole, in short, had an air of being *en déshabille* ; and although it could not be denied that something had been gained in the way of comfort, and that there was a habitable appearance about the apartment which had previously been lacking, yet in Mrs Waterfield's eyes the contrast was so vivid as to be scarcely seemly, and further, to be strangely wanting in reverence to the memory of its late possessor.

She recollected, moreover, that to the Gilberts alone the present cosy disorder must be due. Rosamund might indeed have altered the substantial pieces of furniture ; but Rosamund was not now here to drop work and books about.

There was nothing of the daughter of the house visible anywhere, and as an old family friend, Mrs Waterfield experienced a sensation of having to lower the King's Common standard yet another step.

People of the Gilbert order rumpling those time-honoured chintzes, putting their feet upon those stately stools, piling the cushions together at one end of the sofa ! The novels, too, coarse and common-looking, tossed down just where the reader had lain ! She felt that the half had not been told her.

Poor Em and Etta had indeed yawned through a long morning, and half the long afternoon besides, with no other help than that of those novels, and that fancy work—and the latter having been expressly intended to be done in company, they had felt it to be waste of their fine materials to progress much in it. They had tried the piano and Rosamund's music ; examined everything in and about the room ; wished a hundred times that it would stop raining, and as it did not, had been obliged to fall back again upon their books, their footstools, and their sofa cushions. By luncheon-time they had become acclimatised to the drawing-room ; and although it had been re-arranged during their absence,

they had somehow managed to effect again the full disorder of the morning before three o'clock, when their brother had appeared, as we have seen in the last chapter. Overjoyed, they had then flown out with him, as the sky had by this time cleared; and had left the room with the windows shut and the fire low, just as it was.

“Good gracious! we left that room in a pretty state,” cried Emily, now. “We never dreamed of any one’s coming to call in this country place. And Rosamund away too. It is the mother of those girls who came in at the Abbey yesterday, I suppose.”

“And a precious lynx-eyed mother too,” added Frederick. “So if you haven’t done the right thing, you’ll soon know it. I have a great mind not to go in. I don’t see why I should. She will have to be civil now she finds I am booked here, and all’s settled; but I know better than to believe she is really over-well pleased. If I had taken up with one of her daughters——”

“Surely, Frederick, you will come in; you will not allow Em and me to go in all by ourselves,” implored the much-alarmed Etta. “We *can’t* go in by ourselves, can we, Em? We have never even seen her, and——”

——“She won’t eat you.”

But he could not resist their entreaties, nor his own inclinations.

In his heart he was by no means ill-inclined to play the host on the occasion—he at home, and the Waterfields as guests, in the King’s Common great, reception saloon.

He had never, he knew, advanced to anything like intimacy with the Waterfields; it had nettled him more than once in former days to find they had been entertaining when he had received no invitation; and he and Rosamund had had their confidences on the subject—both of one mind—both triumphing that fate had spited all endeavours to separate them from each other.

“Well, well, I’ll come with you,” he now gave in, with a good grace. “I’ll come along

and keep the good folks in order. I wonder how many of them there be? A whole bevy, I'll warrant 'em. Waterfields — unlimited order — eh, Em? eh, Etta?" and happy in his jest, he was reasonably disappointed at finding only the eldest daughter had accompanied her mother on the occasion.

If Rosamund had supposed that nothing could exceed the disadvantage at which her future sisters-in-law had been seen the day before, she was mistaken. True, they were not now arrayed in gaudy "bests," fresh from a suburban dressmaker, nor were they overheated and disordered by mid-day feasting; but they were louder, bolder, more aggressive, apologetic, and consequential than they had had any opportunity of being in Lady Julia's drawing-room.

Frederick had bidden them pluck up spirit, and be afraid of nobody; and, by way of further re-assurance, he had entered the room first and flourished a welcome.

"How are you, Mrs Waterfield? Glad to

see you again. It is ages since we met. What a lot has happened since then, has it not? Where will you sit? Away from the fire? Bless me, what a shocking bad fire! The girls have nearly let it out. It's what they are always doing at home. Emily, this is Mrs Waterfield. Mrs Waterfield, Miss Gilbert. Henrietta, Mrs Waterfield. I say, Etta, what a mess you have left this room in! Mrs Waterfield will tell tales of you to Rosamund. You heard about poor Rosamund?" turning to her; "oh yes, by the way, some of you were there at the time."

It was now "Poor Rosamund!" all at once, and from all three.

"I never thought to hear that poor child's name so taken in vain!" cried Mrs Waterfield afterwards. "Really, I had hardly the patience to sit still and listen to 'Rosamund! Rosamund! Rosamund!' There was no stopping it, no turning it aside. And when I think of Lady Caroline, the proudest woman in the county——," and she broke off with almost

a groan ; she had not loved Lady Caroline, but she had never wished her anything so bad as this.

“I am going to ride over to the Abbey presently,” quoth Gilbert, after a time. “I came here first, knowing the girls would have the latest news, if I did not find Rosamund herself returned ; so when I found they had not set a foot outside to-day, I just stopped to take them out for a bit. It is dull for them,” he added, kindly.

“It is a great pity,” murmured Mrs Waterfield, longing to add, “they had better go home.”

“Yes it is, an awful pity,” assented he ; “spoils everything. My sisters had come on purpose to cheer her up, for I was sure she was out of sorts, and she had been uncommonly pleased with the idea ; and I thought we should soon have seen her quite perked up. She was as bright as a humming-bird the night you arrived ; wasn’t she, girls ?”

“Oh dear, yes, in such spirits !” replied

Emily; "but still we thought, Etta and I fancied, that she was perhaps, if anything, in *too* great spirits—you know what I mean, Frederick; she was up one moment and down the next. And yesterday morning, she hardly spoke a word. Lady Julia asked if she were tired, directly we arrived there, and Rosamund owned she was; and——"

"I only know that I never saw her merrier than she was the evening before," said Gilbert, not above half satisfied with this; "but, of course, that bears out what I say," his brow clearing. "She has been overdone—the whole thing has been more than she can stand; she ought to get away from this place. And I hope we shall manage that before very long," with a significant smile. "Under the circumstances, I think we need not stand too much on the proprieties, eh, Mrs Waterfield?"

She bowed a cold assent.

"Meantime the point is, how long is this illness to last?" proceeded he. "Makin is a dull ass, to my mind, and is making by far

too much of it. I shall see what Rosamund says of herself. The poor girl should surely have a voice in the matter ; and she is not the one to——”

The door opened as he spoke, and, to the surprise of all, Lord Hartland walked quietly in—as though merely entering from another room.

“Ha ! it’s you ?” cried Gilbert, starting up and intercepting his hand ere he could reach any one else. “Well, what news ? How is she ? Better ? Here is Mrs Waterfield come to inquire ; and we were talking about her at this moment. Is she up ? Will she see me, if I go over by-and-by ?”

This was what Hartland had been sent to prevent.

“Not to-day,” he replied, as soon as he had made his greetings. “Lady Julia bade me say, in case I should find you here, that she feared no visitors could be admitted to-day. Rosamund was going to sleep, and was not to be disturbed.”

“But I need not go yet; I can wait a bit.”

“Medical orders, you know, Gilbert,” said Hartland, who had learned his lesson.

“Oh, medical orders be hanged!” rejoined Gilbert, evidently disconcerted. “I say——”

“I am so sorry,” murmured Mrs Waterfield, her very soft voice seeming to rebuke his strident tones. “I am so grieved that such care should be needed.”

Lord Hartland was silent.

“Is there anything we can do for her?” inquired the practical Miss Gilbert. “Does she want us to send her over anything?”

“Would she like books, or work?” chimed in Henrietta.

“I was not told to ask for anything—thanks,” said the messenger, gravely. “I believe Rosamund’s maid brought over all necessaries last night.”

“Please give her our love, and say how very, very sorry we are,” quoth Em.

“And tell her that Catharine is such a good hostess,” added Etta.

“And that Mr Liscard would have the Irish song again last night.”

“And that the bullfinch took his sugar from my hand this morning.”

There was no chance for Rosamund's old friends to get in a word or express a sentiment, all the interest and anxiety being thus already appropriated.

“I fear the messages will have to wait,” responded Hartland, somewhat drily; “I shall not see the invalid.”

“No, I thought not. So *I* shall not trouble you, Lord Hartland,” and Mrs Waterfield rose to depart. She felt as if she should defile herself by entering into the lists with such competitors; and as Gilbert had withdrawn from her side, and with his sisters was now bestowing his whole attention on the Abbey delegate, nothing remained for her, if she would support her own dignity, but to go, and to go forthwith.

“And a jolly good riddance,” cried the major, on his return from seeing her to her

carriage; "she was no sweeter than usual to-day, that worthy lady. Now Hartland, as I am not to go to the Abbey, you have got to stop on here. We can't leave Mr Liscard again at the mercy of these girls as he was last night. You should hear what an account they have to give of him. By Jove! it will make you stare. They badgered the poor old fellow so, that he was obliged to be festive in self-defence. They would not let him alone. You and I must really be here to protect him to-night."

"I—well—oh yes, I can stop," said Hartland, after a moment's consideration. "I'll just walk back and let Lady Julia know——"

"Walk back! Walk a couple of miles——"
——"Only a mile by the short cut."

"A mile's a mile when there is no reason for it. I can walk as far as anybody, but, by George! why should you do it when there's no object? Surely there are grooms and stable-boys enough about the place? We'll soon see if one of them can't go," and he rang the bell loudly.

Lord Hartland bit his lip.

He had never been quite played the host to in that room by Gilbert before.

He had seen him at home and at his ease there ; but in the presence of his betrothed some sort of appeal to her had usually been necessary. Rosamund's absence had taught her cousin this new experience. He could not like it. He could not but be glad she had not seen it.

CHAPTER XXIX.

GOOD FUN AT KING'S COMMON.

"Then Reason grew jealous of Folly's gay cap,
 Had he that on, be sure Beauty's heart he'd entrap.
 'There it is,'
 Quoth Folly, 'old quiz!'
 (Folly was always good-natured, 'tis said.)
 'Under the sun
 There's no such fun
 As Reason with my cap and bells on his head.'"

—MOORE.

THE order once given, however, Hartland was disposed to take rather kindly than otherwise to the prospect before him.

His own company had become grievous to him by this time, and that of Lady Julia afforded but slight variation. He was dull and sad. The great interest of his life at this juncture lay between the two houses of the Abbey and King's Common, and of this in-

terest he could not speak, and would fain not think, so that distraction almost of any nature was welcome.

The Gilberts might not be to his taste, but he had been about the world enough to take people as he found them, and pass a pleasant evening in almost any company. The rosy, good-humoured damsels who appalled Mrs Waterfield, and for whom indeed none of the women of his set could find a good word, appeared by no means so bad to him, and their open, unsuspecting chatter was a positive relief to his overcharged spirit. With them there need be no anxiety, no doubts, no effort. Of late in his cousin's presence there had grown to be one continuous strain of expectation and apprehension—while out of it, all had been the feverish, fretting impatience of a moth to return to its candle. To be by, to watch, to burn with indignation, and to be daily and hourly more convinced of the truth of his conclusions,—that had been the consuming interest of the past few weeks; and debarred

from it as he now was all at once, with Rosamund unapproachable, and nothing more to be seen or learned, divined or discovered—with the whole affair, in short, at a dead lock—he experienced a sudden desire to throw off his burden, and breathe another atmosphere.

“Come, we’ll have a jolly evening!” cried Gilbert, perceiving something of this. “We’ll have a good time. What do you say to billiards before dinner? The girls will come and look on. It is by far the best time of day for billiards to my mind, especially on these dark days when one has to come indoors so soon. And here’s tea, so we shall just have a nice, comfortable couple of hours afterwards.”

“You must not forget to speak to Miss Penrose, brother,” Emily reminded him. “This is the best time—indeed the only time to catch her free, I think Catharine said.”

“Eh? What? Miss Penrose?” said he. “Oh, ay. I remember about Catharine. Oh yes, I’ll look in on our way to the billiard-room.”

“It is so very awkward for my sister and me being here all alone, you see, Lord Hartland,” explained Miss Gilbert, turning to him for further sympathy. “Being here without any other lady, is really very awkward. So Frederick is going to apply to the governess to have Catharine begin her holidays sooner than the others, in order that we may have her. Although Catharine is made such a school-girl of, she is really quite old enough to go about now, and so Etta and I have been telling her.”

“You have, have you?” thought Hartland. “Rosamund won’t thank you for that.”

“Oh, Catharine is quite companionable,” subjoined Etta. “If we had Catharine, we should not mind at all how long Rosamund stayed away,”—here she caught a scowl from Emily,—“I mean, of course—of course for our own sakes; of course we are dreadfully sorry for *her*——”

“Etta always makes a muddle whenever she begins to talk, Lord Hartland; she only means

that we should not mind for the *awkward* part of it. Of course we miss dear Rosamund dreadfully," apologised the elder sister.

He bowed.

"When do you think she will be able to return? To-morrow, or next day? Candidly, you know."

"Certainly not to-morrow, nor the next day."

"By the end of the week?"

"I hardly think that either."

"Eh! what? Not by the end of the week?" put in Gilbert, with his cup half-way to his lips. "Lord! you don't mean that Makin says that? Why, bless my soul! how very—what an awful pity! How beastly unfortunate! Well"—after a long drink and a careful wiping of his heavy moustache—"well, we must put up with it, I suppose, and do our best to get along without her. But——" and he set down his cup on the tray ruefully.

"There is one thing," said Lord Hartland,

with considerable hesitation, "that Lady Julia wished me to speak about. She was sure that you would agree with her as to the advisability of saying as little about this as possible. We do not want every one to be talking and gossiping about Rosamund——"

——"To be sure not. Keep it dark, certainly, or we shall have the poor girl bothered to death," assented her betrothed, readily.

"And, perhaps—perhaps for that reason—my aunt thought"—stammered Hartland, disliking his commission intensely—"she thought it might be as well for you not to be seen coming over to the Abbey every day. You see," he added, as the faces of all betrayed surprise, "it might get wind, and give rise to suspicion that the illness was more serious than it is."

"But I don't understand. I may go surely, if the girls don't," said Gilbert. "Considering how we stand to each other, and everybody knows about it by this time, I—upon my word—I can't see why my going should bear that interpretation."

“You would not go if she had a mere cold, or headache?”

“Well, I don’t know,” replied Gilbert, laughing, while his bronzed face coloured with a lover’s shame-facedness, which became him well,—“I am afraid I—I should be very much inclined to.”

Lord Hartland rose and walked to the window. It was hard on him to have this just then—just when he wanted to find in Rosamund’s betrothed only the jolly, rollicking, underbred good fellow, and to forget all that it was inconvenient to remember of anything else. When apart from the lovers, and more especially when in Lady Julia’s company, he could almost persuade himself that a man of Gilbert’s temperament, with no refined feelings nor acute perceptions, could not in the nature of things appreciate his cousin, and it need not therefore be feared that more than his importance and his self-complacency would suffer, were she to give him up.

In the depths of his own heart, to be sure,

confidence would occasionally falter ; but he liked to hear his aunt say as much, and could, at times, almost work upon himself to agree with her. Then would come some little word, or acknowledgment such as the above, to undo all, and cause a moment or two of acute agony. He would not show his face during such a moment.

“Since the fates are adverse, I suppose I must give in however,” quoth Gilbert, presently. “There’s no fighting against fate ; and of course I would not be such a selfish brute as to do anything to worry Rosamund. I daresay she is best let alone—only I thought that perhaps she — she won’t fancy I am neglecting her, will she?”

“Certainly not. I will take care of that,” replied her cousin, steadying his voice as best he could, with all Lady Julia’s assurances and asseverations ringing in his ears. “And I really think, Gilbert — I really think that she is better left undisturbed, and that it is her own wish to be so. Invalids, you know,

have their fancies," still painfully evasive of Gilbert's eye, "and Rosamund is undoubtedly far from well. The doctor told me so himself. He said these nervous attacks were not to be trifled with."

"To be sure they are not. I have no doubt the doctor knows best, and will bring her round all right presently," replied the disconsolate lover, endeavouring to recover himself. "I am thankful to say I don't know what nerves are. There are no such things as nerves in our family, are there, girls?"

"No, indeed," laughed they.

"I wonder what our old mother would say to a girl of eighteen having nervous attacks," proceeded their brother. "I say, you two, we must keep it dark from her about this, mind."

"I had thought of that already, brother," replied Emily, "and though I wrote home this morning, I said nothing about it. Mother wouldn't understand; except that, of course Lady Caroline's death——"

"To be sure, yes; we must make the most

of Lady Caroline's death," assented he, cheerfully. "Now, if every one's done, we'll go to the billiard-room. Come, girls,—I say, you two, it's like old times to have you hanging about one again," and he tucked an arm through that of each sister, and led the way.

He played well, as he did most things. His swift, clean cannons, straight hazards, and the manner in which he left his balls disposed for the succeeding stroke, speedily showed him a much greater proficient than his opponent, who scored his highest breaks of ten and twelve with satisfaction, and accepted the "flukes," which would have discomposed Gilbert, with an alacrity that was positively discreditable.

The sisters—albeit openly on Frederick's side, as in duty bound—consoled and encouraged, and at length found their sympathies so strongly enlisted for the one so far behind, that Etta was caught marking stealthily to Hartland a handsome score of her brother's.

Merriment and raillery were the immediate consequence.

(“Ay, ay!” thought Gilbert, “ay, ay! is that what you are up to, miss? Lord, what a joke that would be! Hartland and Etta! Lord, what would the pater say to that! The old gentleman would not know himself. But I said how it would be, before ever I brought the girls here. There’s Hartland for the one, and Jack Stoneby for the other.”)

Before the evening was over, he was shouting with laughter over a new idea.

(“Old Liscard taken with Emily! O Lord! O Lord! I shall never get over it! If it really is so, it would be the richest thing I ever knew in my life. And I’ll lay any money it is so. I never saw him anything like it before,—nor, I’ll wager, has any one else. He was making up to her the whole of dinner; talking away like a perfect parrot; and he would not stop ten minutes in the dining-room after they left—Kant and Cicero could not have held him there with cart-ropes,—and to see him, over the piano, beating time and wagging his old head,—and they say he is to

show them all over his library to-morrow morning, and take them a drive in the afternoon ! Oh, my dear Rosamund, what nuts this will be for you ! I should say she'd be as glad as I, if anything really does come out of it. Well, he's not such an old boy neither ; and he had a sorry time of it with that vixen of a Lady Caroline ; he is quite right to chirp up a bit, and have a little pleasure in life yet. Em's the very girl to suit him. To be sure, there are the children ; but they are young, and I should say the girls would soon go off. Catharine is not a patch upon Rosamund, but she's well enough. Dolly will be good-looking. Anyway, that's their concern, and I know one thing, I should be uncommonly well pleased. I should die of laughing. It would be the rummest idea. Now, I wonder," more seriously, "I do wonder whether any notion of the kind has struck Hartland. Hartland is such a moony chap that I should not be one bit surprised if he had seen nothing ; if it had all passed off like water off a duck's back.")

Hartland had, however, seen enough, and more than enough. On his part he had never felt less inclined to laugh in his life.

Here was a fresh complication, with a vengeance.

It was not quite the agreeable jest to him that it was to the lady's brother, that his scholarly and refined relative, hitherto the personification of pedantry and respectability, as to whom there had formerly been but one feeling, that of consideration and goodwill,—it could not be to him quite what it was to Gilbert, to see the elderly widower blossom out into a new character.

Now, it was perfectly true that not only had Mr Liscard conversed incessantly with Emily Gilbert during dinner, but that the most laborious and long-winded instructions, the prosings which even Gilbert when on his promotion had surreptitiously yawned beneath, had been, to all appearance, hearkened to with the profoundest sympathy and interest by Gilbert's sister. The host had been intelli-

gently questioned at due intervals. He had been drawn out, and led on, as it had scarcely ever been his fortune to be encouraged hitherto. Beneath such treatment he had expanded and thriven, as no one could have helped doing.

In the evening he had joined the ladies far sooner than he had ever before been known to quit the comforts of the well-warmed room and glowing wine-cups. He had made some excuse for doing so certainly, but the excuse had been a slight one, and it had been obvious to all present that the attraction of good company had been the sole and flattering cause of the change. He had invited Catharine to join the proposed drive next day. Catharine had been quite in luck, and had seen that it was her interest to be compliant and agreeable; and, in consequence, there had been no more seriousness nor disapprobation from her, — Catharine, as we know, being one ever to fall in with the times, whereas Rosamund would fight to the death for a principle or a prejudice.

But the sight to see had been Rosamund's papa over the music. On Gilbert's proposing music, he had seconded the move, not with his usual gentle, passive acquiescence, but in a manner unseen before—he had himself stepped across the room with candles, and fumbled with the slides of the piano.

In former times when Lady Caroline, who had supposed herself a musician, had requested to be favoured by some guest, the inevitable response, and that which had been known to suit the petitioner, had been some dreary fugue, or grim, uncompromising sonata. Now the old piano scarcely knew itself. Until the two Miss Gilberts came, it had not been opened since the death in the house; but on that first evening after their arrival, in Rosamund's softened mood, she had been glad to consent to anything, and Catharine had known what to expect on the following night. True, the instrument was somewhat out of tune, for the tuner had been ordered away on the occasion of his last visit;

but this did not greatly afflict the general ear of the company assembled. Gilbert's voice was equal to drowning any accompaniment, and Emily was almost equally independent.

They had sung together and apart, urging each other on, and inciting to further effort; and at the end of every performance, Mr Liscard had applauded and admired. It had even been drawn from him that once upon a time, before he had become a married man, and when he had had nothing else to think of, he had himself dabbled with the flute; and further inquiries had elicited the fact that the said flute was still in existence. Yes, it was certainly somewhere—he could not positively say where—and it was many a year since it had seen the light. But still—and when Hartland had heard him hesitatingly promise to look about among his old drawers on the following day, and see if it could be found, and if anything could be done with it—he had felt that although he had himself heard Lady

Julia remark on the pity it was that the musical proclivities of her brother-in-law had never been looked kindly upon heretofore, she would hardly have cared to have heard them acknowledged on the present occasion.

He was certainly taking more notice of these Gilbert girls than was at all necessary, —and more, his doing so was making it momentarily more improbable that they would fall in with the wishes and hopes which were entertained at the Abbey, for their speedy vanishing from the scene. Was it likely they would want to go, when all was being made so pleasant for them to stay? Mr Liscard himself, from whom no hospitality had ever before been expected, and who was generally supposed not to know who was in the house, and who out of it—here had he been foremost in the task of entertaining! With his evident approval, Catharine had been emancipated, for the purpose of rendering the young ladies easy in their minds; and there had been rumours of excursions here and there,

and driving parties and what not, which had made the whole air festive. There had not been a syllable throughout, to intimate any idea of cutting short the visit.

“No, ma’am, I can’t say there was,” he was forced to allow, in answer to the next morning’s cross-questioning, for Lady Julia had retired, as he had meant her to do, ere he had returned home the night before. “I expect the Miss Gilberts will make out their time. You can hardly expect them to change their plans all in a moment, and they seem very happy, and quite at home where they are.”

“They are sure to be ‘at home’ wherever they are,” replied his aunt. “I daresay, indeed I quite believe, they may be very respectable well-inclined young women in their own sphere of life; but here they are placed in a completely false position. If they could only be brought to see this—if there were any one to put it before them——”

“You should ask your brother-in-law to do so,” said Hartland, drily.

“Theodore! Dear me, Hartland, what are you thinking of? Poor Theodore never was of the slightest use to any one even in Caroline’s days, and now—by the way, does he appear in the evenings? Was he there after dinner last night?”

“Very much there.”

“And how did it pass? What did you do? How did they behave?”

“Oh, it passed very well; everybody was very lively; and Catharine sat at the head of the table.”

“Catharine! That child!”

“You would not have had a Miss Gilbert do so?”

“No, no; you are right. Catharine was better than no one; and she was at least a daughter of the house, though a mere school-girl. But it was a fine chance for Catharine, with my poor Rosamund lying here——”

——“Tell Rosamund; it will make her laugh.”

“She laughs at nothing now,” said Lady

Julia, very gravely. "Oh, Hartland, I am really disappointed; I had so hoped you would bring me some good news for her. I know what she needs more than anything, is to hear that these visitors have departed. It had seemed to me—and I told her so, poor darling—that they *must* go, that there was no other course open; and though when I assured Rosamund of this, she made no reply, I know it comforted her. And now—oh dear!" and she sighed sorrowfully, "I had even hoped they might have fixed to start to-morrow."

"To-morrow they are all going for a drive to Wingleford Ruins."

"All? Who do you mean by 'all,' my dear?"

"Mr Liscard, and Catharine, and the two Miss Gilberts."

"Theodore!" exclaimed Lady Julia, in fresh surprise.

"Yes, indeed," and he looked at her curiously.

But she had not seen Theodore over the piano and the Irish songs, nor heard the pretty speeches which had evoked the still prettier responses.

She was in consequence only impressed by the superfluity of the compassion which had induced the scholar to leave his books, and trot the insignificant Gilberts about the country; he had always, she knew, favoured the match, and doubtless having done so from the first, he now felt bound to back his approval; and being thrown entirely on his own resources, had outdone all that was necessary. Catharine too, eager for the frolic, had probably egged him on. Between them they were doing her darling all the mischief they could, and she could have cried to think how powerless she was to prevent it.

“You say Mrs Waterfield and Eleanour were there when you went,” she began again, presently. “What do you suppose Mrs Waterfield thought of Rosamund’s future sisters?”

"She hardly stayed a minute after I arrived."

"Had she called on *them*, or had she merely gone to inquire after Rosamund?"

"That I cannot tell. But she certainly did inquire very affectionately after Rosamund."

"And she expected to find her at King's Common?"

"Can't tell that either, Aunt Julia. She did not say so."

"Did you say plainly that Rosamund would remain here for the present?"

"I did."

"And what did they all say to that?"

"I think Major Gilbert was very much disappointed."

"I did not mean him—I meant the rest of them."

"I cannot remember that they said anything in particular."

"You might at least tell me *something*, Hartland."

It really seemed cruel that after being a

whole evening away from her, and in the midst of the objectionable and all-absorbing circle, he should produce nothing wherewith to compensate for his absence ; and finding it so himself, he could only suggest that if he were to repeat the amusement he would try to do better.

“Go there again! This evening?” cried she, the same fancy which had occurred to Gilbert glaring in all its horrors full at her. “Oh, my dear Hartland, surely *you* are not being drawn on to—to care for the company of those people? Surely you went last night for Rosamund’s sake—to keep up appearances—to act civilly,—not—not because you enjoyed yourself?” There was something almost ludicrous in the tremor of her tone.

“My dear aunt——” then he stopped short, as he understood what she meant. He was not in a mood to play with her; he could not even be amused by her tortures.

“Set your mind at rest,” he said. “Those poor girls have no more thought of me than

I of them. And, on my part, I can assure you that I should never fall in love with either, if there were not another woman in the world."

In a moment all Lady Julia's benevolence returned. "Poor things! I am certainly very unjust to them; I am sure I am quite ashamed. It is not their fault that they do not belong to our grade in society, that they are inferior in their manners and appearance; and they are really very good-looking, and Emily is almost ladylike. I am so put out about Rosamund that you must see, Hartland, I hardly know what I am talking about. Pray, my dear Hartland, do whatever you think right about going. Go to-night, if you think it best. If it is at all necessary——"

——"Oh, not necessary."

——"But *do*—pray *do*; for my sake do, and it will show there is no ill-feeling. I can positively assure you, now that I think of it, that I should prefer your spending your

evening elsewhere, because then I shall feel free to spend mine in Rosamund's room. Now that you have quite set my fears at rest——" and it ended in his agreeing to go, if only to pacify her.

But he told himself afterwards that it was as well he had done so. Upon this second evening, things were even more amazing than before, and he had nothing to do but to stare and stand by.

It appeared that the expedition had been a great success; that a couple of hours had been spent in exploring and meandering; that Mr Liscard had been the most wonderful authority and guide; that the drive had been undertaken in the morning, because the sky had looked threatening; and that after the return of the party, the rest of the afternoon had been spent in the seclusion of the library;—tea also—wonder of wonders!—having been served in that venerable spot. Catharine, who now seemed to be part and parcel of the whole affair, gleefully informed

her cousin of the fun, or at least of so much of it as had taken place up to date, and he himself was a witness of the remainder. Again he beheld his host all cheerfulness and animation, and marked that his own especial chair, to which he had in old days been wont to retreat as a matter of course, again remained empty throughout the evening. On this occasion, furthermore, there were continual allusions to little epochs of the day, references to this and that occurrence, sallies, whose points were for the initiated only. Gilbert was not present, nor was any one but himself,—but he found that the Stonebys had been invited for the next evening; and he heard—yes, he was certain he heard—Miss Gilbert besought to remember that she was not to yield up her place to Clementina Stoneby,—that whoever was present, *her* chair was at her host's right hand.

“By Jove! ma'am, I have some news for you at last”—he went home in the end, boiling over with indignation and imprud-

ence — “news that will satisfy any extent of craving, I should say. Look here, Aunt Julia, what do you say to this? If Rosamund does not look sharp and get well soon, she will find herself, on her return, provided with an embryo—stepmother.”

CHAPTER XXX.

HAD ROSAMUND BEEN THERE !

"If a daughter you have, she's the plague of your life ;
 No peace shall you have, though you've buried your wife !
 At twenty she mocks at the duty you've taught her.
 Sighing and whining,
 Dying and pining,
 Oh, what a plague is an obstinate daughter !"

—*The Duenna.*

"IF Rosamund does not get well sharp, she will find herself, on her return home, provided with an embryo step-mother !"

Such a prediction was enough to chill any one's blood, and to attempt to depict Lady Julia's feelings on hearing it were useless.

This was now the third shock which Fate had thrust into her hitherto easy life within a few brief months. Her sister's death had cost her many tears and tender recollections ; Rosa-

mund's engagement had been a bitter and daily renewed disappointment of her fondest hopes ; but neither event had roused half such a passion of amazement and horror as that which now shook her soul to its very depths.

Of all people in the world, Theodore !

Her reliable, respectable brother-in-law, who, although he might count for nothing in the family, was presumed to fulfil all requirements in the eyes of the world, and to be as phlegmatic, and obtuse, and safe, as a man and a husband and a father could possibly be ! That he should be the next rock ahead !

It had been such an understood thing that he would not be put out of his way by Rosamund's guests, since none but Lady Caroline had ever been suffered to interfere with any single one of his habits of gentle selfishness—(and even her imperious ladyship had, as a rule, respected the motto, “Live, and let live,” with a spouse who gave her so wide a berth and so little trouble)—it had, we say, been so well understood that the Miss Gilberts would be

nothing to their host, that he had not been taken into account at all.

It had been felt that only by their presence at meals would he know the girls were still in the house, and certainly no one had ever dreamed that he would so much as inquire in what manner they had passed the intervals.

When a man's line of conduct is thus taken for granted, he is in a great measure hedged in by it; and had Rosamund, with her flashing eye and apt speech, sat in her mother's seat, it may be confidently asserted that there would have been enough of the deceased Lady Caroline haunting the air to have turned aside the winged arrows with which it was now bristling. But no one had been by, and the affair had grown like magic.

On the first evening the widower had experienced a passive sensation of being pleased and amused; on the second he had exerted himself; and on the third and fourth no exertion had been needed.

It was known to none, scarce even to him-

self, how and why he had crept year by year into an ever smaller niche in life, and had shrunk and shrunk in order to avoid contact and friction ; so that now his dead wife had only herself to thank if, in the elasticity of spirits consequent on the removal of a grievous pressure, he did not even outwardly affect to mourn her as he should have done ; and if at the first pleasant thing which offered, the smile of a pretty face and the accosting of a merry voice, the dry, withered, unused nature, which had still a germ of life within, should feel the beatings of a new and delicious sensation. Hartland might be disgusted, and Lady Julia outraged, but had they known mankind better, they needed not to have been so stricken with amazement as now they were.

“How odd, how unlike himself, Mr Liscard is to-night !”

Clementina Stoneby was the next person to note something that she had never seen before, on passing the following evening at King's Common, in company with her brother. It

may be remembered that Lord Hartland had heard they had been bidden there. "I cannot understand Mr Liscard at all," pondered she in perplexity, as she stood by the drawing-room mantelpiece after dinner. "I always thought he pretended to read, and really went to sleep, in the evenings. He does not seem at all inclined to sleep to-night. He is quite the host. A flower in his button-hole, too! All the times I have dined in this house, I don't think I have ever seen him with a flower in his button-hole before." She was looking at the object of her reflections as she made them. He was briskly stepping across the room, calling "Music! music!" as he went, while Catharine was bustling about the piano, attentive and dutiful, and cognisant of what was going forward, and a servant was placing a music-stand where no music-stand had ever been placed before, and arranging lights near.

In front of this stand the astonished Stonebys now beheld their host take up his position, while his daughter and the Miss Gilberts with

animation surrounded and encouraged him. What was going to happen next?

Clementina could scarcely credit her own vision when she perceived the outcome of all the preparation — namely, the dignified, abstracted scholar of former days screwing together and putting to his lips a silvery flute, from whence presently emanated somewhat tremulously a sweet, old-fashioned, almost-forgotten melody.

He had, it appeared, already delighted the young ladies; they had had a concert after tea, and he had been promised an accompaniment on the next occasion. He now claimed fulfilment of the promise, and Emily Gilbert sat down to the piano.

“I really think they get on wonderfully well together,” said Henrietta, quitting the group and rejoining the Stonebys after the first duet, “and they will do still better after a little practice.”

“Oh yes, we must practise, we must practise,” came at the same moment from the per-

formers themselves ; and “ You must practise that run, if you please, Miss Gilbert,” and “ You that shake, Mr Liscard,” awoke simultaneous flattery and merriment.

Should they try the difficult passages again ? No, not then,—not before an audience ; they must do it in rehearsal—by themselves—when no one else was present to criticise and complain. The morning was best for rehearsing, the evening was scarcely the time. It would now be preferable to proceed to something else, and agree to meet and overcome all difficulties at a more convenient season.

“ I shall be quite out in the cold once this sort of thing begins,” cried Etta. “ I know what I have to expect when two music-mad people get together ; it is all up with the third person. I reckon these two are going to give me a pretty time of it, what with rehearsals and all the rest. Do, Miss Stoneby, have compassion on poor me, and come up and keep me company when they are at their practising to-morrow morning.”

"I am afraid I shall be busy to-morrow," quoth little Clemmy, very coldly.

"Oh, never mind, I daresay Lord Hartland will be over."

Miss Stoneby was mute.

"Perhaps he will look after Catharine and me, when he finds us left in the lurch," continued Etta; "he has been here both yesterday and the day before, and stopped dinner both times. We half expected him to-night"—(it had been more than "half," and she had donned her smartest frock in consequence)—"but I suppose he did not like to leave poor Lady Julia," continued she. "Poor Lady Julia; it certainly would have been too bad to desert her three times running, and if I were she, I know I should have been in a huff as it is."

"It is no new thing," observed Clementina, briefly. "Lord Hartland is always here. He looks upon King's Common as a second home."

"Does he? But why? They are not near relations."

"As near as any he has."

“La ! how strange that must be, Miss Stoneby. We have such heaps and heaps.”

“Have you indeed ?”

“Thirty-six first cousins on father’s side, and twenty-two on mother’s. We do make a to-do when a lot of us get together.”

“I daresay.”

“I never was in any house full of children where they made so little noise as they do here,” proceeded Etta, confidentially. “To think that there are nine still in the house, even with Rosamund and the two big boys away ? If Lord Hartland comes here to be cheerful——” and she laughed expressively. She and Emily had had their own opinion on the matter, and had agreed upon it perfectly. They did not think Lord Hartland came over to be cheered by the children, nor yet because the place was his “second home.”

“You do not see King’s Common to advantage now,” said Clementina, who reflected that at any rate she did not. “It is not always so melancholy as this.”

“Is it not? La!” cried Etta. “Mr Lis-card told a different story yesterday. He said to Em that the old place was not like itself with us two about, and I don’t know all what about sunbeams and rays of light. He has been making Em ever so many pretty speeches. And as for her, she thinks him quite a dear. For my part,”—and the young lady sank her voice, and languished behind her fan,—“for my part, I prefer Lord Hartland. I own I do like young men better than old—don’t you?”

(“Good gracious, what next?” cried Clementina to herself.)

“I have no doubt we should have seen Lord Hartland here to-night, only that I scolded him so for leaving Lady Julia twice before,” proceeded the speaker, inviting an attack in vain. “I told him that really——”

——“Really I think it must be our time to go,” cried Clemmy, starting up; and she actually did manage to effect an exit, and carry Jack off with her, a full

hour before they would otherwise have gone.

“I could stand it no longer. I really could not have contained myself another minute,” fumed the little steam-engine, panting away homewards. “That impudent, impudent girl ! Oh, you should have heard her insinuations and her affectations ! It is by way of being herself and Lord Hartland, and her sister and Mr Liscard. But, oh, Jack, the worst, by far the worst, is that I fear there really is—is some truth, some horrible, degrading truth in the last idea. In the first I do *not* believe, but in the second—oh dear, oh dear—I shall never forget this evening. Oh, Jack, did you see—did you hear—but I know you did ; I could tell by your face that you both heard and saw.”

“Go on. Tell what you saw.”

“It dawned upon me towards the end of dinner. I began to think that Mr Liscard was wonderfully sociable and wonderfully cheerful ; usually he is neither, you know—at any rate, until the dessert is on the table. He

looks neither to right nor to left while he eats. And I felt that he might have remembered to be a little more particular not to have laughed quite so much, and been so very full of anecdotes and jests, before the servants, —because servants do talk, and of course Lady Caroline has not been three months dead yet; but it was not till there was all that drinking of healths and clinking of glasses at the end, that I began to feel how very disagreeable it was becoming. That was why we were asked, I suppose? To take off Henrietta and Catharine, and leave those two to each other. Horrid old man! I feel as if I could never speak to him, never look at him again.”

“To be sure he has been rather quick over it,” replied Jack, coolly, “but I always thought it would come. He is not altogether the pensive student whose part it suited Lady Caroline to have him play. I daresay you will open your eyes, but I have not much faith in his being a scholar at all. I fancy he

saw it was his only chance of being anything—and, moreover, it secured him a quiet life. He is indolent, and selfish, and if he had not taken up the line he did, he would have found himself endlessly embroiled, and to very little purpose. Lady Caroline would have had her own way in the long-run, and he had the sense to see it.”

“Sense !” cried his sister. “He is showing his sense now, is he not ? Tooting on a flute, with a camellia in his button-hole, to a girl scarcely older than his own daughter !”

“It is hardly decent just yet, I own,” assented Jack, moderately, “but, upon my word, I scarcely know how to blame him. Recollect, my austere Clementina, that this is the first temptation of the kind which has probably ever befallen the poor gentleman——”

“Temptation !” cried the little, busy, workaday, parishing woman, who had no corner in her heart for so much as a weakness, save in the straight, legitimate, prosaic, matrimonial form. “Temptation ! A man between fifty and

sixty, who ought never to be thinking of such things! If he did mean to have a second wife——”

“Pooh! that is not the question. He is merely basking in a bit of sunshine now.”

“How *can* you talk of it like that?”

Jack laughed. Men do laugh at such questions.

“Well, all I know is,” proceeded Clementina, hot and angry, “that as long as Emily Gilbert remains at King’s Common, I, for one, shall not set foot within the house again.”

Jack laughed afresh.

“What is it? What amuses you?”

“Because we are going there again to-morrow,” said he.

He had been invited point-blank by Mr Liscard himself, who had been very well satisfied with the way in which his convenient neighbours had done their part; fulfilled the end for which they had been invited; kept clear of the piano; and maintained the chat at the other end of the room. In the pleni-

tude of his good-humour he had caught the rector and engaged him and his sister for the next evening—they were the only people he could so invite; and Jack, not seeing the affair in the light Clementina did, had accepted with tolerable alacrity. Like Hartland, he required distraction at this time.

Besides, it was such fun to make Clemmy really wroth, and wroth to the last degree she now was, and she was clattering and chattering along as fast as her little feet and her little tongue could go, when they turned in at their own gate, and beheld a figure in the clear moonlight before them. It was Lord Hartland, who had strolled down for a smoke and a consultation, the rectory being, as we know, but ten minutes' walk from his own house.

“Well, what did you see, and what did you think?” was his greeting. “I knew where you were to be to-night, and that you would be home about now. Well?”

The brother and sister glanced at each other.

“Oh, it’s all right; I know all about it,” continued Hartland. “Queer idea, isn’t it? Of course it would never do. Imagine a Miss Gilbert succeeding Lady Caroline Verelst! No, no; it can’t be done. We must conspire to defeat it. If poor Rosamund were only about——” but then he stopped, for one and all were thinking the same thought—namely, that poor Rosamund had enough ado to manage her own affairs, and moreover, had not succeeded so perfectly with them as to warrant her being intrusted with those of others.

But since all had been equally behind the scenes at King’s Common, there was obviously now no need for reticence; and the driving, and flirting, and fluting now going on in the house over whose portico the black escutcheon was still fresh, was discussed through all its length and breadth.

“Rosamund ought at any rate to know of it,” concluded Hartland, with much decision. “And I shall certainly tell her. I shall see

her on purpose. To-morrow afternoon she is coming into the boudoir—it is a dead secret, but she is—and I shall see her, and tell her.”

No one had any objection to make, and he prepared to depart.

“How is she, Hartland?” said Jack, softly.

“She is—just what Aunt Julia chooses to call it, Jack.”

“You don’t think the illness serious?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Is Gilbert admitted to see her yet?”

“No.”

“But you are?”

“I am nothing of the kind—but I mean to admit myself. After what we have agreed to-night, I consider it is my duty to see Rosamund and put her on her guard. My aunt is not to be trusted; and with Rosamund’s temper——”

“I don’t know what you all mean by speaking of Rosamund’s temper,” suddenly blazed forth a little, shrill voice. “Rosamund would

have as good a temper as any one, and be as kind and good and sweet as any one, if she were only let alone. She likes having her own way—oh, I know why you look so; you think she has got it, and no good has come of it. There is something wrong about this engagement, and you both blame Rosamund. Now, how can you possibly know that Rosamund is to blame? I am sure she is unhappy—perhaps she sees she has made a mistake—perhaps Major Gilbert, nice as he is, does not quite, altogether satisfy her, and—and—and—oh, I don't know anything about it, I may be quite wrong, only I cannot bear to hear my dear, dear Rosamund spoken of so unkindly, and you ought not to do it, and you *shall* not before me," further cried the valiant little creature, darting away into the porch with a suspicious tremble in her voice, and a resolution that neither Jack nor any one else should have a chance of answering.

In a sort of maze, Lord Hartland's eyes

followed the retreating figure. Then he turned, and in the clear moonlight faced his friend. "God bless her for the words," he said. "See here, Jack,—we—I—I don't know how you feel, but if I dared, I would tell your sister that—God help me—Rosamund needs no champion with me. I have learned—too late—that I—I must not dare to take her part;" and he turned his head aside.

A hand was laid on his shoulder.

"I have been a fool," continued the speaker, brokenly. "I had my chance, and I did not think it worth the picking up. Another, a better, a braver, and an honester man came by, and saw the value of the prize. He won it, and—heaven pity him, Stoneby—he thinks he has it, and it is all a mockery and illusion. She does not love him; she had almost ceased to care for him the moment he was in her power; she would fain have spurned him from her feet afterwards. And now——" and a too significant silence supplied the rest.

There was a long pause, and at length Stoneby spoke. "I understand," he said, in clear, deliberate tones, "and this is not altogether new to me, though I had hoped, almost against hope, that I might have been mistaken. There is then but one honourable course for your cousin to take; she must confess all to Gilbert, and throw him over."

"And that she will not do."

"Has any one tried her?"

"Do not ask me," said Hartland. "Before heaven, Stoneby, I was innocent of any other motive than that of indignation at Gilbert's wrongs, when I—I—yes, I did it: I urged her to tell him the truth. I thought then, I think now, that an open, unflinching confession of the injustice she has done him, would be the only means of preventing her doing him a greater. Besides, there is another course, and sometimes—I fear—she is trying it."

"You mean, to disgust him."

"Something of the kind—yes. But this is

only the merest, vaguest conjecture. She may never have thought of it; and her petulance and coldness *may* only be the result of her own disappointment,—but I have thought—I have wondered at his patience under it. Most men—I, myself—would not have endured such treatment for a moment. I should have seen, known that it could proceed from but one cause.”

“Gilbert sees nothing?”

“He is too noble to doubt her,” said Hartland, in a low voice.

“And you say you admonished your cousin?”

“I did, in the plainest terms. She thought me cruel and unfeeling, and I think I played the calm observer well. But I fear to look into my own heart, Stoneby: I dread to find what I know is there. Rosamund’s happiness is dearer, far dearer to me than it ought to be, and what is the result? When I see her unjust and contemptuous towards the man she has made her own, it maddens me with

a kind of pain I delight to feel. I could reproach her, torture her, almost tear her in pieces for her cruelty, and yet love her a thousandfold the more because of it. I could clasp her in my arms, and crush her, at the same time. She cannot be Gilbert's wife. He deserves a better fate. . . . She shall not be sacrificed to him. She has suffered already enough. . . . It is a sin to treat a man as she does her lover. He has done nothing to merit it. He . . . She . . .” —he passed his hand over his brow. “I don't think I quite know what I am saying,” he murmured.

“It does not matter with me, you know,” said his friend, very kindly.

“Oh, I am such a fool — such an utter fool!” groaned Hartland, afresh. “Look here now, I say; what do you suppose I care about my so-called uncle and his idiotic flirtation? It is very beastly of him, but I don't suppose anything real or tangible will come of it; but here have I set my heart on

going to Rosamund with it all, and she will break her heart anew over it, that's what she will do—because—because—can't you see, Jack?—because I must see her, and I must have an excuse to see her, and to make her see me; and then, perhaps, who knows?—something—somehow—may be said—ah, don't look at me so, I say," throwing him off with a fling; "I know all that you would say. Just hold your tongue, will you? I am going to see Rosamund, and all you can say or do shall not prevent me."

"I am not seeking to prevent you, dear Hartland."

"You—you—oh, I know well enough what you are saying to yourself. It is what I should say to myself also, if I were not a scoundrel and a hypocrite. I have been shamming, Jack—I tell you, shamming: I have been imposing upon you all—and upon myself, more than any, heaven forgive me! Oh, I have been so impartial and superior, and have looked down from such heights

upon the poor foolish pair entangled in their own net, and have discussed the situation so paternally, while all the time——! You would not have thought it of me, would you, Stoneby? I think even a few days ago, when we were all at that merry luncheon-party, and Rosamund was so playful, and every one so pleasant—I think even then none of you guessed what I was feeling. I did it well, on the whole. Aunt Julia thought me harsh towards her spoilt darling, and almost melted my obdurate heart by her representations. I was to be kind to poor Rosamund, forsooth! I was not to think so hardly of her Rosamund, her own dear Rosamund! Little she guessed that every tender epithet she used, and every plea she put forward, gave me a new delight. They were brands thrown upon a fire that was already burning. I have deceived you all—yes, you too, Stoneby, you whom I pretended to take into confidence, and have been as false to you as to the rest.”

“This is not being false.”

“There are no secrets between us now, at any rate,” proceeded Hartland, with a bitter laugh; “you have got to the bottom of the well at last, and I hope you like what you find there. It is a fine mixture, is it not?”

Stoneby said nothing.

“I suppose you are shocked?”

There was another pause.

“Hartland,” said Stoneby at last.

“Well?”

“If I were to tell you that I feel for you as I never did for any other man,—that I think, I know you have manfully struggled to overcome a terrible calamity, and that, whatever you may accuse yourself of, no one else will ever find you chargeable in this matter, or feel for you anything but the purest honour and esteem—would you believe me?”

“Do you — mean that?” said Hartland, slowly.

“I do, indeed.”

“I thought—I thought—I seemed to myself such a coward, almost a liar——”

“Why? Because you sought to hide, even from yourself, a feeling which you were powerless to prevent, but which, coming as it did, at such a time, was torture? What was there false or dishonourable in that? You have never breathed a word, never sought by word or deed, to undermine Gilbert’s rightful influence——”

“Never—never. If she had been happy, or even if she had *not* been happy, so that she had played him fair, I would have stifled the very earliest breath of another feeling.” The words shook and faltered—but not from hesitation—on his lips.

“I am sure you would,—I know you would.”

“But still it arose,” said Hartland; “and, what is more, it thrives apace. I know not what it feeds upon. I have not seen my cousin since that day when you were there,—how, and why do I love her already ten times more than I did then? The night before, I had been very angry with her, very

unsparing towards her,—on that day we met almost as strangers, we never addressed each other, we avoided each other's eyes, — and now, I can think of nothing and of no one else. By night and day she is before me, with those mournful, hunted, stag-like eyes turned now on one, now on another, as they were on that wretched day. I saw them, though they were never once lifted towards me. I must see them again—I tell you, I must see them again.”

CHAPTER XXXI.

HARTLAND'S MANŒUVRE.

“ And I have acted well my part—
 Have made my cheek belie my heart—
 Returned the freezing glance she gave,—
 Yet felt the while that woman's slave.”

—BYRON.

ALL the next day Hartland hung about restless and unsettled, sharply demanding the reason of every sound, or bell, or wheel, and watching the opening of every door.

His cousin was not to leave her room until four o'clock, but he began to prepare for that hour long before.

In the first place, he despatched a note to Major Gilbert, for the ostensible purpose of conveying Lady Julia's bulletin of the patient, but whose real object lay in a casual line to

the effect that if he should be in Longminster that afternoon, he would look Gilbert up on the chance of finding him in between four and five o'clock.

Such a hint would, he knew, be amply sufficient to keep the hospitable soldier in quarters until after all hopes of its fulfilment had passed,—by which time he was welcome to go where he would. It was a shabby stratagem, for which the writer heartily despised himself,—nothing being further from his thoughts than to appear either at Longminster or at the barracks that day,—but he felt that the Abbey must be secured from invasion at all hazards, and could think of nothing else likely to accomplish the desired end. Gilbert was invariably attentive to him, and proud of any attention received in return, and he had not called often enough to make the civility common. He could reckon on the effect the note would produce.

The next person to be disposed of was his aunt. With Lady Julia hovering round, in-

tercepting every remark, answering for Rosamund at every turn, betraying every thought of her limpid bosom, and effectually preventing his discovering and observing anything for himself, the hour would be shorn of half its wealth. She must be amicably put out of the way; and to that end, he ordered her carriage at a quarter past four, and went in search of her with a scheme in his head.

“Have you any objection to driving over to King’s Common this afternoon?” he inquired, carelessly; “it might be as well to go, might it not?”

“This afternoon, my dear? My feeling just now is, that I must keep as far away from King’s Common as ever I can.”

“But your influence, Aunt Julia——”

“My influence, my dear—what is *my* influence?” cried the little spinster with the utmost vivacity. “I never had any influence,—I never shall have any. Theodore and I have always agreed very well—though I do

think he rather likes to talk to me of dead-and-gone people in books, because he knows I have never heard of them—but on the whole we are good enough friends. Only I feel that he despises me, and that if Caroline had let him, he would have shown it long ago.”

He opened his eyes.

“Oh, I did not in the least mind,” continued she. “Caroline never would have permitted him or any one else to be rude to me, and while she and the dear children loved me——” she stopped, with watery eyes.

“And now my only reason for mentioning this,” presently resumed the speaker, “is to prove that nothing I can do would have the slightest effect upon my brother-in-law. If it were you”——she paused——“if you were to remonstrate, he might listen to you; he certainly thinks a great deal of you; and he is easily frightened, easily managed by those of whom he is in awe; poor Caroline had no trouble with him——”

——“Just so,” said Hartland; “the trouble

comes afterwards. When a man has been in leading-strings all his life, he hardly knows what to do with his liberty when he is turned loose at fifty."

"He ought to think of his family, his connections, his reputation," cried Lady Julia.

"He will think of nothing, and stick at nothing, if once he is in love," said Hartland, with a strange look on his face.

"In love!" Lady Julia almost screamed. "In love! Oh, you would not, you could not degrade the sacred name of love by applying it to such an infatuation. In love! A man whose wife is not yet three months dead! Who has twelve children! Some of them nearly grown up. Who—who—who—oh, the whole idea is degrading and preposterous."

"Degrading and preposterous undoubtedly—but none the less a possible fact. He is certainly giving rise to remark by his behaviour, and that is bad enough. The very servants were tittering behind the screen during dinner the night I was there."

“It is shameful—shameful.”

“And his being seen driving the girls about—a thing he has never done before—will set the villagers’ tongues wagging.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“They will have come in by half-past four, Aunt Julia.”

“Am I really to go, Hartland?”

“I have already given a conditional order for your carriage, ma’am; they will bring it round, unless you send word to the contrary.”

“Thank you, my dear,” said poor Lady Julia, humbly: she was never better pleased than to be thus played the tyrant to, and he had the grace to feel ashamed as, soon after, he saw her go cheerfully up-stairs to get ready, having no notion why she was being sent, nor what she was expected to do, nor indeed with any understanding of the case at all, except that he had willed, and she must obey.

He met his deserts when she came down again.

“It is as well that you proposed this for

me, my dear," she cried at once. "Rosamund has given up the idea of coming into the boudoir to-day; she thinks she will not venture. I told her I thought of going to King's Common, and she was quite pleased— anxious, indeed, that I should. Poor dear, she has not yet confided in me, though every day I hope she will. But we must first get all these Gilberts out of the way——"

——"If we can."

"Dear me, Hartland, how gloomy you look. You were much brighter a little while ago, but you have clouded over again since I came down. What is the matter? Nothing new? Nothing more?"

"Nothing, ma'am," shortly.

"You were not thinking of going with me, I suppose?"

"You will get on better without me, Aunt Julia."

"*That* I shall not; but, however, there is no occasion for your being dragged over. It is not an agreeable visit——"

“And there is no need to make it too complimentary.”

“Certainly not. And were you to go, it would be decidedly too complimentary. You are quite right, as usual. I shall set off by myself, then, and you will stop here to mount guard.”

(“A thankless guard,” muttered he, to himself. “And when all had turned out so luckily! I shall never again be able to manage as well. Next time, things may take their chance, for me.”)

The embassy returned in part baffled—but in part enlightened. Lady Julia had seen nobody, but she had learned a good deal. The whole party, consisting of Mr Liscard, his daughter Catharine, and Emily and Henrietta Gilbert, were over at Longminster, lunching at the barracks, and spending the afternoon in viewing the various objects of interest in the town, according to Badeley, who had added that they were not expected home till dinner-time, and that Major Gilbert

was, he believed, to return with them. An orderly had ridden over in the morning with a note from the major, directly on receipt of which, orders had been sent to the stables, and the young ladies had run to get ready, —he did not think there had been any talk of the project before the arrival of the orderly. The party had started soon after twelve.

(“He had just had time to get my note, and send for them,” concluded Hartland, perceiving it all at a glance. “So if my plans have been knocked to pieces, there is the satisfaction of knowing that others too have had theirs disconcerted.”)

It would hardly have amused him to have walked about Longminster with Etta Gilbert, preceded by Em and Mr Liscard, and followed by Catharine and her big brother-in-law-to-be. He could see the party now, in his mind’s eye, and a faint smile stole over his face.

Lady Julia had next, she said, driven on to the Waterfields’, and Mrs Waterfield had told her a vast amount of tell-tale.

The whole neighbourhood was agog about the past week's doings at King's Common. How two handsome young ladies in the smartest of blue and red cloaks had been each day trotted through the village in Mr Liscard's own particular mail-phaeton, the widower himself handling the ribbons, and one or other of the gay visitors on the box beside him. How they had been seen going and returning, and had evidently been long distances. People had remembered that Mr Liscard had never driven Lady Caroline. He had either been alone, or accompanied by some elderly male friend, when he had had the phaeton out in former times. The change had been taken note of instantly, and servants' gossip had supplied all that was required for further predictions.

"I said I did think that a great deal more had been made of it than need have been." Lady Julia had done what she could for the family credit, and thus reported her efforts. "After hearing all, I told Beatrice

Waterfield that although I could not defend my brother-in-law from the charge of thoughtlessness, and want of respect to poor Caroline's memory, yet that it should be remembered that he had lived so entirely his own life, and been so much out of the way of hearing public opinion, that he probably never gave appearances a thought in the matter. What the outside world thought, never did have any weight at King's Common. Indeed, my poor sister was a little, if anything, *too* unconscious of it. It often distressed me, I know, to hear her talking away of having done this and that, as if it were quite the right thing, and in the most complete ignorance of its having any other aspect—when it had perhaps come round to my ears that the poor dear had given dire offence by the self-same act! Oh, one may be quite too independent, I really do think——”

——“Very true, Aunt Julia, but *that* you will never be. You love to consider every one. Now then, about Mrs Waterfield.

What did she say? How did she look upon your line of defence? Did she go in with you, or with the village folks? Did she—had she—I suppose she had drunk it all in, and was ready for more? Every one will be glad of a fling at King's Common now, Mrs Waterfield at their head," be added, bitterly.

"My dear, I do not think you should quite say that. Beatrice was poor Caroline's friend, and naturally she was shocked and grieved. I own I did think that perhaps she entered on the subject rather eagerly; and rather perhaps dwelt upon it more than she need have done; but——"

"Ha! ha! ha!" burst out Hartland. "I thought our kind friend would not be far behind the rest. So she 'dwelt upon it,' did she? Fully and lengthily? Missing out nothing? Not she,—oh dear, no. It is a rare piece of fun for them all. Oh, but King's Common will afford them better sport yet. They are not half done with us yet."

“Hartland !”

She looked at him in amazement. One moment all kindness and gentleness, the next all mockery and derision. It even seemed at times as though he absolutely gloated over the havoc of all the old customs and traditions, in the wreck of what once had been.

But the laugh had been unreal, and its unmirthful tones jarred painfully upon her ear. She could not, she would not blame him for it. If only she could understand him ?

And he ? He felt that he had let her understand too much, and the mask fell on the instant.

“Seriously, my dear aunt, we must consider what is to be done. To-day’s jaunt will not do much towards silencing the talkers, and to-morrow being Sunday, there will be a good attendance at church, I should say. The good souls will flock thither to see what is to be seen in the King’s Common pew. What do you propose to do, ma’am ? Shall you be there ? Shall

you go in the morning, as usual, or"—with a happy thought—"shall I represent you, while you stay at home with Rosamund, and I can relieve you in the afternoon?"

"When she could come into the boudoir, instead of to-day," assented Lady Julia, in her own little easy way. "Yes, my dear, that would do nicely; that would be by far the best way. She would like to see you, I know; and no one else need know anything about it."

He could not help feeling that all his former *finesse* had been wasted. Had he simply suggested in the morning what he did now, he might even at this moment have been by Rosamund's side; and though re-animated by the new prospect, he wished he had not been so clever before.

"She will not come down to-night?" he ventured.

"Oh, my dear, no; you have no idea how much she dreads a change of any sort. And you can understand that were she once to

appear down-stairs, we could not make her out to be unfit for more,—I mean—we could not quite put the same face upon her illness,—and really a little management—I would not be untruthful for the world, but in a case of illness, you know, management and firmness are absolutely necessary. She *shall not* see those Gilberts,”—and Rosamund’s plump little guardian angel looked as red and determined as she had ever been seen in her life, and drew up her small, roundabout person, until it positively grew in height before Hartland’s eyes.

He felt he could safely trust her when in this mood.

With infinite pains she now planned the next day’s campaign, decided who was to be in and out at church and chapel, interviewed the clumsy Joseph, a new-comer, whose first Sunday at the Abbey it was, and who was to be porter for the afternoon (an office as often as not a sinecure, but which on this particular Sunday had risen to importance), and at the

appointed hour on the morrow, betook herself off down the avenue, prayer-book and hymn-book in hand—but her bodily presence, it is to be feared, ever getting farther and farther away from the spirit which had been left behind.

Ah, if those had but been two lovers she had left there! Even as matters stood, there was enough of doubt and uncertainty about them to afford a gleam of hope, and even a gleam in those dark days was something. She now knew for certain that Rosamund had ceased to care for Gilbert, and she knew—at least she thought she knew—that this fact had a strange interest for another.

Wisely she wished to know no more. Time must work out its own problem.

Still it was delightful to think of her own two sitting together in the cosy boudoir, and of Joseph's strict orders to exclude all others; and feeling that such a state of things could not be improved upon, the service, even with a christening in addition, seemed all too short,

and the rector and his sister were favoured with her ladyship's company for a good half-hour after its conclusion.

So long indeed did she linger, that the swift approaching darkness rendering an escort advisable, obliged Mr Stoneby to offer his own. He was not sorry, thinking he should see Hartland ; but Hartland was nowhere about, and though Lady Julia made sure of finding him with his cousin, she was told he had been gone from the boudoir some time previously. Rosamund looked fatigued and pale, and her aunt felt sure she had been in tears, and that more had passed than she was to hear of. This was a little, just a little, hard to bear, and almost any one else, even the kindest and tenderest of nurses, would have pressed for a confidence, or, at any rate, have sought to beguile one.

Not so Lady Julia. With a loving tact which only the purest unselfishness could have prompted, she seemed to see and observe nothing, while she ran cheerfully on about

the weather, the sermon, the collection, and the congregation, as if these subjects alone occupied her mind.

Next she went down to dismiss her escort, and see him off the premises, with an instinct that he was not wanted at this crisis; and finally, despatching the trusty Charlotte to attend to the patient, she did not even indulge herself by returning to the boudoir, but betook herself off to her own room, as was her habit at that hour.

There we will leave the kind soul, and see for ourselves the scene to her mortal vision denied.

Hartland, on being admitted to his cousin's presence, was inexpressibly startled at the change which a few days' illness had wrought in her. He had not realised that this change had begun some time before; that the fragile form now before him had been drooping and wasting for some weeks past, and that the strength had been by swift degrees also waning. Accustomed as he had been to

seeing Rosamund almost daily, the gradual alteration had been invisible; it had been obliterated by the feverish flush upon her cheek, the fire in her eye, the agitated voice and restless movements—there had been a false brilliancy thrown over all—and it was not till he perceived her divested of all stimulus, and every motive for effort and exertion, that he was convinced that Lady Julia's demonstrative anxiety had not been overdone.

At the first sight, indeed, he felt as if his aunt had scarce been anxious enough.

His step involuntarily slackened, and his accents grew tremulous as he drew near the large arm-chair in which the invalid reclined, and made the inquiry, "Are you better, Rosamund?"

"I think so, Hartland."

He sat down. "Tell me if I am in the way, you know."

"Oh yes, I'll tell you." She smiled, then flushed and paled, and a sense of embarrassment began to creep in. Was it to be an

interview of ordinary commonplaces and small-talk, or one fraught with the deepest significance and purport? Each seemed to know that if nothing were now to be breathed of that which was causing alike each heart to beat, one would be as grievously discontented as the other : and yet, who was to speak? Who was to begin it?

“I hope you do not feel this room too warm,” murmured she, at last.

“Oh no; it is very comfortable.”

“Aunt Julia would have the fire made up before she left.”

“She was quite right. We need large fires now;” and he shivered slightly, looked out of the window at the gathering mists, looked again at the brightly blazing fire, and finally looked at her. The last glance was hurried, and almost stealthy—and she knew it was so.

“What have you been doing since I have been up here?”

It seemed as if something must be said by one or other to prevent a blank, awkward

silence ; and, as usual, the woman was the quicker.

“Nothing that I know of—nothing at all, that I can think of.”

“Have you seen anybody ? Have you been anywhere ?”

“I have not been anywhere, except to King’s Common.”

“Well ?”

He was silent.

“I must say you are not a lively companion,” observed poor Rosamund, at her wits’ end ; and, moreover, a little exasperated that all the task of taking the initiative should be laid upon her. “Come, think of something to say—something to tell me ; and let it be amusing and interesting, if you please. Exert yourself for my entertainment. You were sent here to entertain me ; and now, when——” then she suddenly met his eyes, and broke off.

He was looking her full in the face ; and, struck afresh by her paleness, her feebleness, the dark rims round her eyes, the poor at-

tempt at gaiety—the whole so touching in its pitiful appeal—he could no longer repress evidence of the emotion with which his breast was charged.

“I see,” said she, in an altered voice. “I see. You are sorry for me.”

He nodded.

“If I thought I could speak about it, and—and—if you would have patience, and—be—a little kind,” continued the speaker, her own breath beginning to come and go, “I should like to say something. Could you come a little nearer?—no, not so near as that,” smiling, as he instantly placed a chair at her side; “now you frighten me. It is only that I—I am not very strong, and my voice goes away sometimes, so that I cannot make people hear. There, that will do,” as he moved a pace or two farther off. “Hartland, I daresay you can guess what it is that I want to say. I was very angry with you that night.”

“So I saw, Rosamund.”

“I want you, first of all, to forgive me.”

“You mean you wish to forgive me, dear,” —the word slipped out, he did not know when he said it.

“I mean nothing of the kind,” said Rosamund, firmly. “I mean that I know now that I was wrong, and that I knew it then —though my proud, miserable heart would not acknowledge it; and that it was right and true of you to speak as you did, if it was a little—a little hard to bear;” and her lips quivered. “I have been very wicked. I have been acting a cruel part; and I am frightened and ashamed when I look back upon it,” continued she. “It was worse, worse than even you knew, Hartland. You don’t know what a dreadful, dreadful temptation I had, and how I gave way to it when we two, Major Gilbert and I, were alone together; and I thought, I fancied no one would ever know how it had come about if we separated, nor whose fault it was. If you had seen how odious I sought to make

myself! How I would repel his kindest advances, and refuse his most trifling requests—why need I go into it all? No other man would have borne it for an hour; and *you*—you would never have come near me again.”

He murmured something, she could not catch what.

“You knew nothing of this,” she repeated, mournfully.

“I saw enough to—to——” stammered he.

“I had fancied no one about me saw anything, till you spoke. Oh, how astonished I was! Well,” after a pause,—“well, it is past. I have had time to think of it all;” she covered her face with her hands. “I have thought, and I have tried—to pray. God will help me now to do what is right. I think I see my way clear. I hope it is. I will try to love him——”

Hartland started.

“I will do my best to make up for all these weeks of unkindness, and he will learn

to forget them," continued the speaker, endeavouring to be calm. "And you, dear cousin, must learn to forget them too, and that you ever had to give me that evening's warning. It ought to have opened my eyes. I think it did. Only I was so unhappy. But I am happier now—my mind is clearer. I wish to do my duty; and surely to be the wife of a kind, good man like Major Gilbert is no great punishment for all that I have been, and done. I deserve that my self-will and stubbornness should have brought a far, far greater one upon me. If I can only make up to him for all—be to him all that he thinks me——" here again voice failed.

"You mean this, Rosamund?" He spoke at last.

"Indeed I do, Hartland. I have thought it all out, as I have lain in there hour after hour, by night and by day,—you don't know what long, sleepless nights I have had, hearing the hours chime one after another,—and

even when I have been sleeping, I have had the one thought working in and out of my dreams, till sometimes I could scarcely bear any more. I shall see Frederick to-morrow, if—if I am well enough”—and again her faltering accents betrayed the effort,—“and when he comes, I shall beg him to overlook all my foolish petulance and coldness. I hope he will put it down to illness—I think he will. It would be best, because I could not explain——”

“Why not?” said Hartland, in a deep abrupt tone.

“Tell him that I had—had——”

——“Ceased to care for him.”

“For shame,” said Rosamund, indignantly; “you know that I could not do that. For his sake, I could not. If I did, it would be—it would be—oh, you know as well as I, what could be the only result of that. I must—yes, I must let the past alone; and in the future he shall have nothing to complain of.”

“Can you do this, Rosamund?”

“I can:” she clasped her hands — “I can.”

“Your mind is quite made up?”

“Quite, quite; nothing can alter it now. I look upon myself already as Frederick’s wife, and what I could have done then, I can now. I feel myself as much bound to him by what has passed between us, as if I wore the wedding-ring. Am I not right? You do—you must think I am. And as I knew that you have always liked Frederick, and have always done him justice, I felt that I wished myself to tell you this, because you had been vexed and pained with me on his account. You will never need to be vexed with me again, Hartland,”—and her voice was inexpressibly low and sad,—“believe me, I shall not vex you any more.”

He laid his hand on hers, and felt that she was weeping.

The gathering dusk had settled over the little room, and hid the faces of its occu-

pants; the blaze of firelight had died down, and betrayed no secrets.

Silently the two sat for a few moments, thus.

She thought that he had accepted her promise, and that she had his approval,—he felt all further speech to be useless.

Neither spoke again, and presently he rose, and went softly out.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE TRUTH.

“Truths that wake
To perish never.”

—*Ode to Immortality.*

“And my soul, from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor,
Shall be lifted—Nevermore!”

—E. A. POE.

“EVEN yet she is not willing to give it up? She actually intends to *go on* with those Gilberts even now?” cried Lady Julia in the utmost consternation, when time and pains had elicited at length as much from Hartland.

He was standing with his back to the speaker, leaning heavily against the mantelpiece in an ungracious, uncommunicative attitude; and as she watched him, all the little flutter of hope and expectancy until now half-unconsciously cherished, sank and faded away.

It was by watching rather than by listening, that she gathered she had now nothing either to hope for or expect.

“My dear,” she proceeded mournfully, “do bear with me for once, and—and look round and tell me all. Is Rosamund—do I understand that her mind is made up to *go on* with those Gilberts?” Rosamund’s engagement had now, it will be seen, become in her aunt’s eyes no longer a thing by itself, but was merely one portion of a fell scheme on the part of a marauding trio now occupied with their other prey, and who, if not prevented, would presently swallow up father and daughter alike. “They are such dreadful, dreadful people!” moaned she.

“There is not a word to be said against him!” exclaimed Hartland, almost fiercely. “Believe me, Aunt Julia, your best policy is to give up all this hostility and reconcile yourself to the inevitable. You will do Rosamund an infinitely greater service by cheerfully accepting the position; receiving Major Gilbert

as her future husband ; and, for her sake, overlooking whatever to you is not agreeable about him and his ; than by seeking to dissuade her from doing what she believes to be her duty. You know Rosamund. She is more hard to move when she is calm and collected, than in the heat of battle. She is perfectly calm now, and what she says she will do. She may be right—I do not know. But this I am sure of—she is not to be moved. Therefore——” He paused, drew in a long breath, and dropped his head again upon his hands.

“She will have a bad night after this,” reflected Lady Julia, relapsing into the patient’s nurse. “And I had so hoped she was to be better, not worse, for the little change. I had thought that you might reason with her ; and that if she could be once prevailed upon to put an end to this odious affair——”

——“For heaven’s sake, ma’am, no more of that ! Forgive me, Aunt Julia,” said the young man, letting go his hold and coming towards her, “I am not fit to talk to you

about it—that is the truth. But if I could only bring you to see that—that this sort of thing must be stopped, that these expressions are of no use—in short, that the marriage is as good as consummated now in Rosamund's mind—you would surely understand to talk differently. When a thing has simply *got to be*——”

“So you say, Hartland; but,” replied Lady Julia with quiet persistence, “there is time yet. It cannot possibly take place before some months have passed.”

“It ought to take place at once.”

Her jaw fell.

“My dear aunt,” continued Hartland, more gently, “I know this is hard on you. Perhaps it is so on me, too. I am not eager for the alliance. But what I said before, I repeat—that for good or ill, Rosamund will now keep her word; and if you had seen her as I did this afternoon—feverish, hurried, tossed, and yet immovable—you would know that it is no kindness to prolong this state of suspense.

Once the thing is done, I think she will be happier,—God knows, I hope so.”

“But you still think she does not love him?”

A spasm crossed his face.

“What do you think?”

Still no reply.

“Do you think she ever can, or ever will?”

With a sort of convulsion the answer came at last.

“No. God help her, *no!* No . . . no . . . no.” And a groan, which could no longer be suppressed, forced itself from between his clenched teeth as the last word died away.

Lady Julia fell back in her chair. For once in her life power of expression was denied her; and though she remained still and motionless where she was for a long time, only every now and again glancing uneasily round at her companion, she never once addressed him further, and they separated for the night without any attempt at reopening the conversation.

“Yes, she has had a bad night, as I feared

she would, Dr Makin," she announced to the little doctor, the following morning. "She was over-excited in the afternoon, talking and seeing people——"

"Major Gilbert was over, I suppose?"

"No, not Major Gilbert. No, he has not seen her yet. But—but others. And they talked, as young people do; and forgot that she was an invalid, and could not bear much. If I had been at home—but I was at church, at the afternoon service, and she came into the boudoir, and Lord Hartland joined her there," proceeded the simple lady, who invariably undid her own infantile efforts at diplomacy the instant after they were made,—"Lord Hartland was with her all the time——"

"Ah!"

"And I found her quite tired out, when I came home."

"That was a pity."

"And she has been very much exhausted ever since."

"No breakfast, eh?"

“A cup of tea. Hardly anything besides.”

“Medicine suiting her?”

“She will tell you that best herself. I think her head aches, but it may not have had anything to do with the medicine.”

“Probably it has, though. If a composing draught is not allowed to take effect, it is apt to produce headache. Revenges itself, as it were. Well, we must have no more exciting conversations. Lord Hartland will please to remember that. And as he is not Major Gilbert——”

“She is determined to see Major Gilbert to-day, however,” said Lady Julia. “And I cannot stop it, unless—unless you——” and she regarded her kind old friend and adviser wistfully.

“Suppose we go up and have a peep at our patient first, my lady. I will not let her see any one, nor do anything that is to harm her—you may be sure of that. If Major Gilbert is to prove as bad a companion as Lord Hartland,” smiling, “we must just close the gates,

and pull up the drawbridge." Saying which, he held open the door with his little air of old-fashioned courtesy, and followed his conductor up the staircase.

But his face was longer when he came down again. "She really is by no means so well as on Saturday," he pronounced very gravely, directly he and Lady Julia were again alone in the drawing-room. "Pulse and temperature both unsatisfactory. No appetite, and a good deal of fever. Colour too bright. Restless eye. I do not understand all this nervous excitement"—then he raised his head, which had hung down as he ruminated, and cleared his throat with the look of a man who has taken a sudden resolution.

"Lady Julia, I am going to be very plain with you, and you must excuse my saying that I expect you to be equally plain with me. It is no possible good my coming and going and prescribing for my patient, unless I am put in full possession of all the facts of the case. I cannot undertake to benefit your niece in the

slightest degree, if anything, any mental disquietude, any undermining source of trouble, is kept back from me. That something of the kind exists, I cannot help surmising. I feel nearly sure that there is something or other weighing on Miss Rosamund's mind, and counteracting all our care. If that be the case, I may as well discontinue my prescriptions, for they will do her no good. Unless we can strike at the real evil——”

——“Oh, if we could !”

To his surprise, Lady Julia made the above ejaculation with an amount of fervour for which he had been unprepared.

“Well, my lady,” he began.

“Hush—sh—sh !” rejoined she, in a whisper so imperative and prolonged, that it seemed as if the echo of the final “sh !” would never die away ; and then she looked round the large, many - windowed apartment, cautiously and fearfully. “These rooms are so very unsafe,” she murmured. “It is almost impossible to be sure of not being overheard in a great room

like this, with all these pillars, and stands, and statues. Is that door shut? No. But the sound could hardly have been carried so far. Still, would you oblige me by coming this way? The library is usually empty at this hour, and Hartland is out, I know, this morning. There we may speak freely; and I own, Dr Makin, I do wish to speak freely. I must have a little unreserved conversation with you. Follow me, if you please." And she led the way to a smaller apartment, yet stately in its own fashion, lined with book-cases, and comfortably supplied with lounging-chairs, writing-tables, and light literature. A fire was burning brightly in the hearth, and its blaze was not the less welcome that the light from the large, mullioned window was partially obscured by a heavy folding-screen, drawn midway across, to keep out possible draughts. The softest of Turkey carpets completed the luxury of the whole, and rendered a footfall almost inaudible.

Lady Julia advanced nevertheless with a

stealthy tread, as though conscious of being on an unusual errand; and it was not until she had first seen that no Lord Hartland was in his usual chair by the fire, that she beckoned her companion to follow, and noiselessly slid the fastenings of the door after him.

That done, however, courage appeared to return, and in her wonted quick, energetic tones she plunged at once into the heart of the matter.

“Dr Makin, you are right. Something is preying on Rosamund’s mind; and it is this most unhappy, most unfortunate engagement to Major Gilbert which is the cause of her illness. She——”

A look—what was it? A gleam of horror and affright upon the face in front of her! The eyeballs starting from her companion’s head! His lips falling apart! His raised, warning, imploring hand! What could it mean? Upon what was his terrified gaze fixed, above and beyond her?

Upon something, or — oh, heaven!—*some*

one? She turned. It was even so. She found herself confronted by Gilbert himself!

At the first sound of her voice, he had awakened from a musing fit in the window embrasure; and although he had advanced on the instant, he had not been able to present himself, before he had distinctly caught every syllable uttered in Lady Julia's clearest, most emphatic accents. His movements had not been able to keep pace with her rapidity; and all could now perceive what had been done.

A frozen minute succeeded, grim to look back upon, terrible to experience.

Dr Makin was the first to recover himself. "I will look in again this afternoon," he said, hastily; and the door opened and shut after him, leaving two motionless figures within, breathing silently in each other's faces.

"I heard something so strange just now," said Gilbert at last, speaking slowly, and looking steadily at his companion, "that if I had been in any other house, or if it had been said by any other speaker——"

Lady Julia sank down upon a seat, and covered her face with her hands.

“But you,” continued the voice, which should have been familiar to her, and yet was one the like of which she had never heard before—“you, who have been ever a kind friend, a true woman ; you whom I respect and esteem, whom I have ever had cause to be grateful to ; you, who alone in this unfriendly neighbourhood have shown me frank hospitality and kindness, have welcomed me to your family hearth——”

“Stop—stop.” She put out her hands as though to deny his words, but he took no notice.

“You, I know, would not deceive me, would not resort to such a method——”

“Oh, no—believe me—indeed, indeed——” She wrung her hands in anguish unbearable : no moment of her life had ever been like this.

“And yet I hear you say such words, and say them, too, in such a way, that had they been uttered by any one else—by any man at

least—I would have dashed the lie from his lips,” proceeded the speaker, with a calm that was far more appalling than tempest. “I hear you tell another, and him no subject for a jest—I hear you make an announcement to him that is so—so strange—that concerns me so nearly, that I can only bid myself to remember you were once my friend, and ask if you were not dreaming—not wandering—when you thus spoke?”

She shook her head. She durst not look at him.

“*Not?*” said he. He paused, and watched her for a few seconds.

“Have you any right—any authority—that you thus dare to make a statement which——” He paused again.

Still no word, no sound emanated from the bowed form at his side.

“Lady Julia, I am entitled to a reply.”

“If Hartland were only here!” moaned she at length.

“Lord Hartland!”

“He knows that it is the truth, only the truth ; but oh ! that you should have heard it thus !”

“If it be the truth, what matters how it is heard ? But let me understand you, Lady Julia, and, I beseech you, no trifling. This is life and death to some of us. You spoke of this ‘most unhappy, most unfortunate engagement.’ To whom is it unhappy and unfortunate ?”

She winced visibly.

“I have a right to know,” he said. He did not move from where he had taken up his stand by a hair’s-breadth, and the very muscles of his face were rigid.

“It is her I have to think of—my only sister’s own child,” whimpered the frightened, timid woman at last. “Oh, Major Gilbert, you do not know what Rosamund is to me. If she has made a mistake, and has not acted towards you quite as she ought to have done, let me put in one word for the poor child, the poor darling, too young to know better, not able to run alone, and so bitterly, bitterly punished.”

——“Punished!” The word escaped him.
Lady Julia echoed it.

“Punished, indeed. Oh, she has suffered—no one knows how she has suffered. Could you not see it? Will you not believe it?”

“When you can explain your meaning, Lady Julia,”—but in spite of the assumed firmness, he was shaken.

“It was a mistake from the very first,” she almost whispered. “You know how closely those poor children had been kept; and, as a matter of fact, you were the very first person who had ever been bold enough to pay my poor Rosamund any attention,—lovely as she was, she had scarcely been seen, and she had never seen any one—hardly any one, in return. She admired you—you became a sort of hero in her eyes—indeed in all our eyes, for your noble, your courageous conduct,—and then she thought, she fancied,—in fact, she mistook that feeling for another. My poor sister saw this, and would have saved her; but unhappily her interference roused all Rosamund’s

generous nature. She would not hear the absent attacked. She supposed then that she cared for you,—but she did not know herself. She did not know what she was doing. Major Gilbert, will you, can you, have pity on my child? She is so young. And oh, forgive her. She is so miserable.”

He had not, by word or sign, attempted to stem the current of her words. He had hearkened attentively, drawing long breaths, but without movement or exclamation; and she felt that if she could only move him, reach him, break through this terrible self-control, it would be worth all the risk and effort.

She began to plead afresh. “What I only saw the other day,” she said, “there was one of us saw long ago——”

——“Who?”—— Like a bolt from a cannon-mouth.

“Hartland warned me it was so——”

“Hartland did, did he?” There was rising passion in the tone. “This is Hartland’s doing, is it? He saw—he whispered—he

sympathised — perhaps he even suggested, — oh, I think I see the light now. A peeress?— A coronet?—She would have been an angel if she had not been tempted. And yet I could have trusted Rosamund,” softening — “I could have believed in Rosamund——”

“Believe in her still. Oh no, she has not been tempted ; and he has never tried to tempt her. Would it had been so!” sighed poor Lady Julia, unable to resist the aspiration. “It was what we all wished——”

“And he has been in league with you?”

“He has not—he never would. Oh, long ago, long ago, if they could have—have cared for each other, we should have been so pleased, so glad,—but it was not to be. No, Major Gilbert, you are altogether wrong about Lord Hartland,” with a fragile attempt at dignity ; “there never was anything between them—never.”

“Why, so I thought,” said Gilbert, gloomily. “But what the devil — your pardon, Lady Julia, but what, then, is a fellow to suppose?

You tell me he was the first to—to perceive this alteration in my future wife, and what am I to understand from that, but that he had a special motive for such discernment? I suppose Rosamund has confided in you?" he added, abruptly.

"No, I cannot say that she exactly has."

"Not asked advice, nor besought your intercessory good offices — that sort of thing?" scornfully.

"Never, by a single word," averred Lady Julia, with the utmost solemnity, and not perceiving the extent of such an admission.

"Not!" exclaimed he: his surprise was evidently great, and was followed by a look of doubt and perplexity. "But I thought—I thought—you came straight from Rosamund's room; I never doubted but that you had her warrant——"

"I had nothing of the kind. She and I have never let one word upon the subject pass between us."

"More and more strange," muttered Gilbert,

but the cloud upon his brow obviously lifted. "You must allow me to observe then, Lady Julia, that you were hardly justified—though what matters it?" he suddenly cried, with a reaction to joy and relief alike touching and frightful to behold. "My dear lady, I excuse you; I know you mean well; but I believe, from my soul, you are in error. You have been misled by this illness. You have been upset, and have hit upon a false scent. You have not been all day, and every day, with your niece, as I have of late, and seen this coming on—the result of grief, a shock, a nervous depression all at once. Your own medical man vouches for this attack being one of pure nervous depression. Take my word for it, you have been dwelling on it with exaggerated apprehensions, until they took this form. Possibly you had noticed, and misunderstood, some trifling irritability—Rosamund has been unable to help a little irritability of late—and you have connected this with your present fears. Oh, I was a fool, a madman, to take

for granted what I did. I will not so wrong her and myself again. Unworthy suspicions of Hartland too! But I scarce knew what I was saying. Let me now go up to Rosamund. I am impatient—can you wonder at it?—to put this misconception straight, although I promise you that I do not fear the result. No, I do not doubt her—not for a moment. She must never know that I once did—it would hurt her too much.”

“Major Gilbert, I cannot let you go up.”

“Is she in a nunnery—is she locked up behind prison bars?” cried he, half angry, half jesting. “Come, Lady Julia, trust me. I will do Rosamund no harm. I am not a boy with no experience of sick-rooms; and I will be as tender as a woman with your charge. She shall not suffer through my seeing her,—but see her I must,” he added, in a tone that none would have dared to trifle with. “This is too serious a matter—I had almost said an accusation—to be altogether dismissed; and your good doctor must not be left labouring under

a delusion, neither. From Rosamund's own lips——”

——“She will not give you up,” cried Lady Julia, in an agony.

“I shall not ask her to give me up.”

“Are you going to question her? Oh, Major Gilbert, it was the truth, the solemn truth, you heard from me——”

——“I hardly think it was.”

“Oh dear, oh dear! I cannot say more. I cannot convince you——”

“If it be the truth, Lady Julia, Rosamund can convince me: one word from her——” and he moved towards the door.

“One moment—one moment. I know she will say she will marry you. If that is the question you mean to put to her——”

——“It is not the question.”

.

“I have not come to torture you, my dear, nor to blame you. You have told me truly, as in the sight of heaven, the one thing I cared to know, and why need I remain for

more? You no longer love me. All is over between us."

The brave soldier knew the worst, and faced it thus.

"I should never, never have told you. Frederick;—God knows I meant to be—to be a good wife to you," faltered the pale, death-like lips before him. "I have been so miserable, so ashamed"—between heavy sobs—"and I had been going now to be so different. Let me try. Only let me try. Frederick, there is still time, and I can, I will,—if you will bear with me, if you will but have a little patience, and—and trust me once again."

"Do you and myself a great wrong, Rosamund?"

"Oh no—not now. Not now that you know all. I ought to have told you myself, ought I not? They said so, but—but I was such a coward; and I thought, I fancied things might come round without that. You have forgiven me, haven't you? And you will let me try, won't you? None but ourselves need

ever know, nor guess about—about to-day. Let it be so, Frederick. Let it be between us two. You will help me to——”

——“Deceive the world? Is that my proud, pure, spotless Rosamund? Would she go with me before the altar with a lie in her mouth? Would she let me place a lie upon her finger? Give me her fair cheek to press a lie upon?”

“Oh no! Oh, not that!”

“No, not that. You could not do that, Rosamund. You could not carry it through, even if you were to try. Many a woman could—but not you. See now, you have broken down already, broken down at the very outset, and that so palpably that others have seen it, though I was blind. Do you really think that you could vow in the sight of heaven to love, honour, and obey me——”

——“But I would, I *would* do them all.”

“Your will is strong,” he said sadly, “but it has been beaten in the fight already. You do not love me, you could not——”

——“At least I could honour and obey.”

“The words are nothing,” said Gilbert, with a momentary impatience; “the spirit would not be there—it is dead already. Do not press me further, Rosamund; I am not a hasty man. You have no cause to fear that I shall ever reconsider this decision, or importune you further. Here we part, and part for ever. There is no ill-will between us.” His chest heaved. “I think I shall always care for you,” he said.

“Oh, stop! Oh, this is dreadful!”—she caught his hand.

He smiled drearily. “Not so dreadful as it might have been. Be thankful it has not come too late for both of us. You will grow well, and forget, and be happy. If you should marry Hartland——”

——“Marry Hartland!” Her surprise was evident and genuine. He looked keenly at her. “It was a mere idea,” he said; “I ought not to have given it utterance. Still, I am glad I did; glad to know——”

“Good heaven! you did not suspect me—or him—of such a thing?” cried Rosamund, in new agitation. “Yet what right have I”—with a fresh burst of tears—“to feel insulted by any suspicion? But Hartland, what has *he* done?”

“I will tell you, Rosamund. Lady Julia let fall that he had been the first to penetrate the secret of your altered looks; and such quickness——”

“But it was on your account, Frederick, indeed it was. If you had heard how coldly, how harshly he spoke to me—if you had seen how little he seemed to care for *my* pain! He was kinder afterwards; but even now,”—and her lip trembled afresh.

“Yes, I believe he has acted a fair and honourable part by me,” said Gilbert, after a pause; “he——”

——“He has—he has.”

“So be it. Bid him ‘farewell’ from me, and assure him of my—of every kind feeling. Tell Lady Julia I pray her to forgive any—

thing I may have said unkind or disrespectful just now, when I was hardly master of myself. I shall see your father, and personally acquaint him with the truth. I will save you all I can. And now,"—he took her hand,—“and now, my one, my only love—the time is passing—and we may never meet again upon this earth,—say one kind word—give me one look—one kiss,”—she sobbed aloud, but there was no moisture in his eye,—“do not let it trouble you; but if you could say it,” he murmured, “let me have this one assurance to carry through life, that whatever may be the present state of your heart, you loved me *once*—you loved me that one, happy day?”

She tried to speak, but could not.

“Nay, then, I will not press it.” He misinterpreted the evident struggle. “I see I was in a fool’s paradise——”

——“No.” The answer came in a hoarse, quivering whisper at last. “No. You were not. Not then. Not at that time.”

“Was I not? You *did* care?” A gleam stole over his brow.

“I did. Believe me. I truly did.”

“You did love me—or at least you thought so?”

“Yes; indeed, yes.”

“That, then, at least, is still my own. Thank God for that. I may dare to treasure that one remembrance—that broken spar from off the wreck. All the rest is gone—gone.” He put his hands before his eyes for a moment, removed them, gazed long and earnestly upon her face, then turned to go.

“Farewell,” he said, “farewell. I shall leave this neighbourhood as soon as possible, and England likewise. You shall not be troubled with me. Farewell, Rosamund,”—he stood still for a moment, then, as if impelled by an irresistible agency, stepped to her side, lifted the moist tresses from her cheek, kissed it once again, raised his eyes, as though praying heaven to bless her as he did so—and was gone.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

“JILTED ! IT’S AN UGLY WORD.”

“What signifies breaking some scores of solemn promises? All that’s of no consequence, you know. To be sure, people will say that Miss didn’t know her own mind, but never mind that. Or, perhaps, they may be ill-natured enough to hint that the gentleman grew tired of the lady ; but don’t let that fret you.”—*The Rivals*.

“WHAT has happened? What has been going on here? What have you been doing?” cried Hartland, in burning accents, as he burst in upon his aunt a few minutes after. “Something has been done. I met a man going out—a man with a death-blow written on his face—as I came in just now. Speak! what has Gilbert heard? And who has told him?”

“Oh, my dear, it was not my fault. Do not look at me like that. I have done noth-

ing—or, at least, I did not mean to do anything ; but by the strangest, the most extraordinary mischance, he heard——”

——“He heard ! Heard from whom ?”

“I hardly yet know how it was. But it is done——”

——“Done ? Yes. I should say so. But how ? Quick—for heaven’s sake, be quick, and tell me how.”

“He was in the library, waiting, I suppose, for you. No one had told me he was there ; or, indeed, that he had come over at all. I suppose he had not been shown into the drawing-room, because the doctor was there. Dr Makin had just told me plainly that he could do our dear Rosamund no good, unless he were made acquainted with all her secret trouble——”

——“What did he know of Rosamund’s secret trouble ?”

“A medical eye, Hartland——”

——“Confound his medical eye ! He has had the chance of hearing and seeing, and has

put two and two together. So *he* informed Gilbert ?”

“Indeed, no. It was *I* who was informing *him*——”

——“Him—Makin ?”

“I had no choice. When a doctor insists upon it——”

——“And Gilbert overheard you ? But ——” He could not understand such overhearing. “I had always thought him the soul of honour,” he muttered.

“It was not Major Gilbert’s fault : he could not avoid it. Unluckily—though I can hardly say ‘unluckily,’ for we must be thankful——”

——“Well, ma’am, well ? Wait a bit to be thankful. Be thankful at another time,” cried Hartland, beside himself with anxiety, and the dread that anything had been done unworthy of their name. “You were in the act of telling Makin about the engagement—no doubt with all your own comments and interpretations. May I ask if

you had proceeded far ? Had you mentioned names ? ”

“ I had hardly said a dozen words ; but, unfortunately, or rather——”

——“ Oh, fortunately, or unfortunately—anything. He heard the fact ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ How ? In what words ? Can you remember ? Pray try to remember.”

“ I remember only too well ; for during all that dreadful silence which followed the disclosure, I kept repeating them over and over in my mind, to make sure what it really was that he had heard——”

——“ Well, what were they ? ”

“ I told Dr Makin that he had been right in supposing a trouble was weighing on Rosamund’s mind, and that this trouble was her unhappy, unfortunate engagement to Major Gilbert. I had scarcely named his name, when I saw by Dr Makin’s face that something was wrong, and there stood Major Gilbert himself behind me ! Just here,”

pointing to the spot. "I have not left the room since. I have not dared to stir, for fear of meeting him again."

"How had he allowed you to proceed so far?" said Hartland, frowning.

"It was impossible for him to make known his presence sooner. He had to get out from behind the folds of the screen; and probably he had not realised the presence of any one, until after I had begun to speak. Even then, he would not suppose there could be anything very private in an opening sentence."

"True," said Hartland, thoughtfully.

"No, he was not to blame," proceeded Lady Julia, who could afford to do her vanquished foe such justice. "It took but a few seconds for me to say what I did, and then—there he was."

"I suppose he was terribly shocked and—
and overcome?"

"My dear Hartland, I was so frightened I could not look at him. But his voice—his tone——." She shuddered at the remembrance.

“Did he believe in it?—I mean, at once?”

“I think so—at first; and then again he did not. He hardly seemed to know how to take it. He was very quiet—very self-restrained; but every moment he seemed to me to increase in a kind of dreadful power as long as he stood over me, piercing me through and through with those great, hungry, raging eyes——”

“There—that will do!” cried Hartland, with a sickened look; “I know. I can see them. Good God! that a woman should have dared to inflict such anguish!” And he turned away, his own face working in strong emotion.

“He is gone now,” almost whispered Lady Julia.

“Gone—and for ever. I tell you he has left this house—our house—cursing it in his heart. He has been befooled and betrayed among us. Among us he has been led into a snare, that may be his ruin. What do you care? What do you think about the end of all this? You women—you don’t know how

hard it goes with a man to be held up to pity among his comrades—to pity, and to ridicule ; to being talked about, and laughed about, and told there are others, and instructed to forget, and bidden to begin again. Jilted ! It's an ugly word. Can a man pardon it ? I think, hardly. And he loved her—loved her, and trusted her. His faith in her was so perfect that it undid all her reckless attempts to undeceive him. He could not disbelieve. What it must have cost him to disbelieve at last ! ”

“ I am afraid I have not thought enough of that,” said poor Lady Julia, her better nature asserting itself. “ Certainly I ought to remember how very sad and painful this must be for poor Major Gilbert.”

“ Sad and painful ! ” almost shouted Hartland ; “ I—I—better not speak of it, ma'am : I doubt if you know what pain is. I did, once. I don't like to think of that time. We need not discuss this further, I think : you had better go to Rosamund ; and I, to—the

devil,” he muttered between his teeth, distracted by shame, and a dim and lurking sense of guilt.

Lady Julia, only too thankful to be released from a second interview, little less inferior in its terror to that which had preceded it, flew like the wind—or, to be more exact, panted up the broad staircase as fast as she could—to the boudoir, and scarcely waiting to have her tap at the door answered—for not to tap at such a time would have seemed ungenerous—she entered, and found her niece, not, as she had expected, excited, impatient, tearful, ready to be comforted and caressed, and at heart inexpressibly relieved—but in a state requiring immediate physical attention.

Pale as death, spent with weeping, unable to utter a sound or raise a limb, Rosamund half lay, half crouched among the cushions of the little settee, upon which she had sunk when Gilbert left her. A feeble moan ; a raising of the heavy eyelids, which fell again instantly ; and a nerveless, ineffectual effort to stretch forth a

hand which also dropped at once, were the only indications given of her being conscious that any one had entered.

She seemed as one in whom all powers of thought and feeling were for the time suspended, leaving only an agonised sense of utter weakness, — as one so bruised, and crushed, and numb, that the very life itself was fast ebbing away.

Lady Julia stood still, her own heart turning cold at the sight.

All inquiry had been answered and expression checked by that mute, stricken figure, those swollen eyelids : even now as she looked, a watery thread trickled down the cheek, on to the soft pillow beneath, and was left to dry itself.

“Not even strength to care about that,” murmured the beholder. “I am well punished. I little thought that when I gave out she was so ill before, it was so soon to be the simple truth. This has half killed her. O God, spare the child !” and with the cry she fell

upon her knees, and prayed as she had never prayed before.

And Rosamund was very ill.

Day and night succeeded each other, and week after week likewise, while she still lay on that bed of sickness, mind and body alike prostrate, knowing nothing, and caring for nothing, beyond what passed within the four walls around her, the dim workings of her overclouded brain never going beyond the little events of the sick-room’s daily routine, and all the outer world a blank.

No one ever spoke hardly of Rosamund, even when her tale came to be told. It was felt that, however great might have been the mischief she had wrought, and the wrong she had inflicted, she had nearly expiated all with her life.

Let us now return to others.

Gilbert, on passing out into the raw chilly air of that December morning, with all his dearest hopes blasted and his future in ruins, was too much under the stimulus of strong

excitement to give even a passing heed to anything beyond the exigencies of the immediate present. By the aid of this spur, he was enabled, without hesitation, to proceed upon what his clear resolute mind decided must be done on the instant, and allowing himself no time either for doubts or repentance, he strode along towards King's Common at a pace which brought him there, before it seemed that he had well started on his way.

Mr Liscard was out—but the young ladies were at home. They were going in to luncheon.

Luncheon! A faint pang just made itself felt at the word. Luncheon is a cold and awkward meal, contrasting unfavourably with the cosy tea, or the glowing, genial dinner,—but it had suited his military arrangements to come over at that hour, and with it was connected as much or more than with anything else, the dead past.

To go in now as before! To sit in the accustomed spot! To look round the accus-

tomed room, and mark all the old arrangements and habits, and feel that he was seeing these for the last time, and that even now, even while there, it was another than the Frederick Gilbert, who had been wont to fill that place, who was present at this time ! And he himself—where was he ?

Pulling himself together as well as he could, he looked at the footman who had answered his summons, wondering if aught amiss in his speech, or appearance, had been visible ; and repeated the word “Luncheon ?” as an excuse for taking a moment’s time to think. Could he endure it, and go through with it ?

“The gong has just sounded, sir.”

“No one else is there, you say ?”

“No one but the young ladies, sir,” and the man stood aside with so evident an expectation, such an air of “It is all right. You are one of us. Pray be quick,” that it was irresistible.

Loathsome as was the vision of food, and

noise, and talk, and laughter, the ordeal must be gone through; and it began, as might have been foreseen, with the sisters' first sight of his face. They sprang forward.

"Frederick! What is wrong? What is the matter? Why do you look like that?"

He kissed them both.

"Now, look here," he said, taking a firm, determined grip of each one's hand—"look here. Listen. There *is* something wrong. There *is* something the matter. But I can't tell you what, till afterwards; and do not say one word about it till I can. Don't remark upon me—nor take notice of anything—nor ask a question. We must come in now; and keep still before the servants. Now, remember," and he unlocked their hands. "You will know soon enough," he added, under his breath.

"One thing, brother, only one," implored Emily. "Rosamund? Is it about her?"

"Yes." His mouth shut as if it were a vice; and he turned on his heel, and walked

through the open door into the dining-room, leaving them to follow.

“She must be worse, and the marriage is put off, I suppose,” whispered the one, to the other. “I know he has been there. He was to see her to-day. Poor Frederick, he seems regularly to feel it.”

“And after all, it is no great matter ; it is all very nice as it is,” nodded back the other.

They saw that Frederick poured himself out a glass of wine, and suffered food to be placed before him, and made a feint of eating for as long as the servants remained in the room,—but it took little observation to perceive that no morsel in reality crossed his lips ; and, as they further noted that from time to time he glanced impatiently at their plates, and then at the clock, they understood to hasten their own proceedings to a close.

“Are you ready ?” he asked, perceiving this.

“Yes, brother,” replied both, simultaneously.

“That’s well. We shall just do it,” taking

out his watch, and comparing it with the timepiece in front of him. "Yes, we have half an hour. I suppose they can bring a carriage round in half an hour."

"A carriage has been ordered for half-past two, as it is," said Henrietta. "We are going in to Longminster to fetch Mr Liscard; and we were to start early, in order to have the whole afternoon before us."

"For Mr Liscard is going to take us a long delightful drive," added Emily, with animation, "through a part of the country we have never seen before."

"At what time did you say? When was there a carriage ordered?" demanded Gilbert, waving aside with a frown the superfluous communication. "At what o'clock?"

"At half-past two."

"That will do; but what carriage was it to be? It must hold four."

"The mail-phaeton, if the weather kept clear."

"It is clear," glancing out; "we must have

the phaeton. But it must be punctually here at the time, or as soon as we can get it now,” and he rang the bell.

“If we are not going for Mr Liscard, brother,” suggested Emily, “ought not some one to meet him and tell him so ? He expects us, and will wait——”

——“The phaeton can go on after it drops you at the station ; I will take it on myself.”

“At the station ?”

They had not anticipated this : they had severally conjectured, in the brief time given them for conjecture, that something was amiss at the Abbey, and that they had been sent for thither,—but they were altogether thrown out by this new revelation. They now glanced mutely at each other, while Gilbert, in curt, imperative tones, gave the orders ; and on his next motioning them in silence towards the room they had quitted, he was obeyed with ever-growing uneasiness. His set face, the stern, forbidding air, so unlike the gay spirits which usually characterised their light-

hearted brother, brought an increasing conviction that they stood on the brink of a precipice from which he had already plunged.

“What are we now to do, Frederick?” inquired the elder, at last; “shall we——” and she looked for commands.

“Yes, you must get yourselves ready, and as quickly as you can. But wait—just a moment first;” he stopped, then began again, and was again unable to proceed.

“Look here,” he said at last, in a strained, husky undertone; “it is of no use, I can’t do it. I meant to tell you all, but I find I can’t—yet. You must not mind. You must do as I bid you without knowing why, for the present. I think you would—you will, when you know what I—what we all have to bear.”

“Yes, brother.” And they came close to him at once.

He looked at one, and then at the other; but they knew that he hardly saw their faces—that he was lost in something different.

“This is what you have to do,” he said, presently. “I know it is hard upon you, but try not to mind. Go up-stairs and put on your things for a journey. You are going home to-day. You are going by the three o’clock train.”

Both uttered an ejaculation.

“You would not yourselves wish to stay, if you did but know,” muttered Gilbert. “Now listen. You are going straight home, as I said. You will tell our father and mother that I am writing to explain why. I will write by this evening’s post——”

——“But Frederick——”

“Well ?”

“Our luggage. Our trunks cannot be packed in the time.”

“They must be sent after you. Leave word. Drop a pencil line to Catharine.”

“But what are we to say ? What reason are we to give ?” The two doleful voices roused a sense of irritation in their listener, to whom it seemed as if they could have nothing to grieve for, and might have spared him.

“You have nothing to do with reasons,” he replied, sharply. “I will myself see Mr Liscard, and give him the true one. But stay,” he added, after a second’s reflection; “for the look of the thing, tell Catharine that you were called home suddenly, and had no time to say ‘Good-bye.’ By the way, where is she to-day?” suddenly missing her.

“Miss Penrose has a sort of examination, and gives prizes for the half-year, and I believe Catharine hoped to get one. She did not wish to miss it——”

“Well, well, never mind. It was lucky it happened so, that’s all. Now, be quick, and”——here he once more looked fixedly at each,——“and be silent. Do not be overheard talking and conjecturing. Walls have ears.” And he flung himself into a new attitude, as though stung by a sudden recollection.

They took their departure.

“Emily, Emily, what is it? What can it be? Oh, Em, I am so sorry; it is too horrible. To be packed off like this, just when we were

so happy, and were having such a delightful, delightful time ! And Frederick seemed as pleased as we, only last night, and laughed at you about—you know whom. It is too bad. . . . I shall travel in my best hat—I shan’t go away a dowdy from a place like this. . . . Oh dear, oh dear, to be going away at all !”

“It will make Mr Liscard very angry,” said Emily, sitting gloomily down to lace her boots. “I should not in the least wonder if he were to send after us, and bring us back. If only he had not been away from home to-day !”

“Do you really mean that ?” cried Etta, brightening with the idea. “Why, then, we need not hurry about the luggage. Em, let us say nothing about it. Forget it, you know. Then we could just slip quietly back again, as if nothing had happened.”

“I think we must mention it. Frederick is sure to ask if we have, or not. Frederick never overlooks anything, and we must do what he says, Etta, whether we like it or not. But I can say,”—scribbling as fast as she

could,—“I can say that it does not signify about sending it for a day or two, as we have plenty of things at home, and do not want to trouble any one. There, that will give us a little more time. And if it be as I suppose, that Rosamund is in for a long illness, and that people have been disagreeable, and telling Frederick that it is not nice for us to stay on here, and have made him declare in a huff that we shall go home, why, if he had only not been in such a hurry, we could soon have put things straight. Mr Liscard would not have heard of our going. He needs us all the more if Rosamund is going to be ill, and stop on at the Abbey. And now that we have got Catharine, and have made all proper——”

“Only listen to that dear old sheep-bell!” cried Etta, running to the window, and opening it. “Oh, to think that perhaps we are never to hear it again! And I do love this view of the lovely park, with its great trees, and the deer, and the beautiful, broad avenue. I had got to feel quite at home here, hadn’t you?”

And I am sure I had never thought I should. And I don’t mind the men-servants a bit, now that I am used to them—nor all the grandeur. Oh, how happy we were only an hour ago, planning out every day this week, and—oh, Em, the Waterfields—what are we to do about the Waterfields?”

“We must leave cards to be sent,” said Em, profoundly. “Mr Liscard will see to it, I am sure.”

“You always think first of Mr Liscard,” observed her sister, with a smile. “I declare, Em, I wonder whether our going like this can possibly have anything to do with Mr Liscard.”

“Nonsense !” said Emily, who had already been wondering the same thing. “But I am very sure he will be vexed about it,” she added, “and I do think he ought to have been told. There—that’s my brooch pin gone ! I knew it was loose yesterday. And where *are* a pair of gloves ? All our things are in such a muddle. I had meant to tidy

them up only to-day. We never seemed to have a moment when we came in to put things by, and I do think Rosamund's maid might have helped us more than she has done." The truth being that Rosamund's maid had not helped at all. The pampered domestics of King's Common, accustomed to judge of every one by the standard of their late mistress, had speedily left the Miss Gilberts to shift for themselves, as soon as they found that their first formal tenders of assistance had been rejected. Young ladies who brought no maid, and dressed their own hair, could do anything.

"I daresay half our things won't come," quoth Henrietta, now; "I don't at all like leaving them."

Emily felt as if she hardly cared whether they came or not; and the first stroke on the gong, telling of the carriage being round, struck on her ear as the knell of doom. They hurried down, and found their brother in the hall. "Have you left any money?" he said, aside.

They had not thought of it.

“Here,”—he took some gold pieces from his purse. “Give these: you know best how. Look sharp.”

“Brother ! Sovereigns !”

“Give them, I say. No, stop, there is no time to lose. Give them to Badeley here, and ask him to see they go to the right persons.”

She did so, and returned. Henrietta was already in the carriage.

“Get in, quick,” said her brother, impatiently, and was by her side on the instant, Etta having humbly taken the back seat.

“To the Abbey, sir ?”

“To the station.”

The sisters glanced at him. He bit his nether lip as he spoke. He was looking straight in front. His arms were folded.

There was something so stern, so hopeless in his air, a resolution so immovable in his countenance, that involuntarily they shrank and quailed before it.

He sat, an iron figure, with front of adamant, and eyes deep-set and burning beneath lowered brows, as one who neither sees nor hears aught of the passing scene ;—and beholding him thus, they themselves scarce durst move or breathe, —realising more and more that they were in a presence all unknown before—the presence of an awful sorrow.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

HARTLAND UNLIKE HIMSELF.

“O Love! tormentor! fiend!—whose influence, like the moon’s, acting on men of dull souls, makes idiots of them, but meeting subtler spirits, urges sensibility to madness.”—SHERIDAN.

WITHIN four - and - twenty hours after the events recorded in the last chapter had taken place, every busy tongue in and about the two great houses of the neighbourhood was ringing with its own version of them.

Some facts were beyond dispute.

Rosamund Liscard was lying dangerously ill at the Abbey, and Major Gilbert’s sisters had departed from King’s Common in a mighty hurry; but what was the connection between these, or whether there were any connection at all, was enough of a mystery to be delightful and provoking.

It was all very well for the young ladies to give out that they had been summoned home unexpectedly. Mr Liscard's household could testify that no summons had come through any other medium than that of their brother the major (and the major had certainly been the person to spirit off the two), but neither he nor they had dropped a hint of bad news, sudden illness, accident, or any one of the usual causes of a hasty exit.

Of course the family might have chosen to keep their own counsel. There might have been ill tidings after all; and if it had been so, and if, on hearing these, Miss Liscard had been taken worse, and her future sisters-in-law obliged to flee, nothing more could be said. But the gossips shook their heads, and knew better.

No, no; more than that lay beneath the surface. And the first idea that naturally presented itself was that Rosamund's papa had been brought to book for his late high misdemeanours. The old gentleman had been

enjoying himself far too much, and the young lady had got wind of it. Probably, then, she had taxed her lover with his sisters' indiscretions, and he, in wrath, had swept them off to satisfy her.

His gloomy brow, the severity of his manner towards them, and their frightened, cowering obedience under it, were all attested to; and the major, who was as popular as his sisters were the reverse, was allowed to have done the right thing — no second mistress being desired at King's Common.

The major, then, they concluded, did not choose to have his family talked about; and as the members of it now under discussion had not known how to behave themselves, it had been "to the right about face" with them.

And to be sure, said one and all, it served the misses right, and the old gentleman too. Say he did intend to have another wife one of these days, no one would have gainsaid him, if only he had waited a reasonable time and chosen a reasonable lady.

Lady Caroline had not been beloved, and it would have seemed only a righteous retribution, had a successor to her been found at the expiration of a twelvemonth ; but the indecent haste with which the widower had suffered himself to be beguiled from his seclusion was one offence, and his having found a siren in Miss Emily Gilbert was another.

Miss Rosamund's lover was all very well : he was major of his regiment, and for the time being in command of it ; and the regiment was stationed hard by. Every now and then he might be seen riding out with his men, a gallant, handsome fellow, with a fine, authoritative air. He cut a dash in his tandem dog-cart, kept a couple of smart grooms, and spent his money like a gentleman. To crown all, he had saved Billy Barley's life, at the risk of his own.

Altogether he had been regarded with complacency as a suitor even for Lady Caroline's daughter, and her ladyship had been stigmatised as haughty and arrogant, and quite

beyond bearing with her airs and her pride, because she had not lent herself to the general sentiment.

But Major Gilbert was one person, and his younger sister was another.

For her was no accompaniment of military grandeur and beat of drum: for her no red-coated orderly would dash over with important despatch, or telegram; nor could she handle dexterously a pair of frisking thorough-breds. To be sure, a French abigail, and a silver-mounted dressing-case might have done something towards retrieving Emily's credit; but the sisters had been brought up plainly, and, wealthy as the family was, did not know what feminine luxury meant. It was their code that Frederick must have this and that—great, gilt monograms on his toilet accoutrements, and handsome fittings to his travelling-bag;—but none of the girls whom they knew indulged in anything better than they had themselves, and they were content to be on the same level. Accordingly, although their

outfit for the much-talked-of visit had been selected with care, and contained many new and expensive articles of dress, it was deficient in those trifling accompaniments which are the delight of ladies'-maids and housemaids. Neither embossed silver nor ivory, neither satin sachet nor embroidered shoe-bag, was there to be seen. "Not a bit o' lace nowhere," whispered one saucy minx to another behind-backs, "and only the meanest of edging! La! they ain't nothing."

All of this was told down-stairs, and down-stairs told outside, and outside spread itself to right and to left; and the outcome of it all was, that Mr Liscard was felt to be lowering the standard of the whole establishment, by paying court to a lady who brushed her hair with a bone-handled brush.

To have had the popular voice with him, he should have selected the daughter of a noble house—or at least of an old county family—and have gone gradually and soberly to work. But instead, he had jumped up all of a sudden,

like a jack-in-the-box, banged the proprieties about their ears, and gone for the first pretty, simpering pair of lips that said a civil word to him. Shame upon him, the silly old man !

There could be no doubt as to his vexation over the hasty finish put to his felicity.

He had come home from Longminster, apparently aware of what had happened ; indeed the groom attested to his having had a meeting with Major Gilbert in the town—and he had clearly been very much put out, indeed quite nonplussed, by it. Miss Catharine's company at dinner had been declined ; and she had been further informed, in terms that had admitted of no discussion, that her presence for the rest of the evening could also be dispensed with. He had not himself gone in to the drawing-room. He had retreated, as he had been wont to do of old when worsted in a fight, to his library and his books, and coffee had been served to him there.

Presently the village doctor had joined him ; and the increased illness of Lady

Julia's charge had been announced to Mrs Ossory, and Mrs Ossory had been requested to attend to divers directions, and had herself had a word with Dr Makin, which had troubled the good soul not a little.

But for all that, every one knew that Rosamund had not been the thought uppermost in her father's mind upon his return from Longminster, and that although her state might now be as alarming as was given out, he had not then known it to be so.

To himself, indeed, it is to be feared, the attached parent almost went the length of allowing that his daughter's illness was opportune.

"It will stop people's tongues for a time," he reflected, "and save a vast amount of exposure and scandal. She has been a great fool. Gilbert would have made her an excellent husband; he has a good fortune, and the family is highly respectable. If she fancied him once, what possessed her not to go on fancying him? Is there any chance of

patching up the affair, I wonder? No; for she has her mother's own temper. Besides which, he won't give her the chance. I never knew such a piece of folly in my life. All done in a hour! All made an end of, without giving one time to put in a word! If poor Caroline had been alive, neither of them would have dared to go up and down, backwards and forwards, like this. She, poor woman, always disliked the match, and tried to prevent it—but I knew the world better. I knew that Rosamund might have gone farther and fared worse. Besides, husbands are not rife in these days, and it does not do to pick and choose. It was nothing but Caroline's ridiculous fancy about Hartland that made her object, moreover. She could not see that Hartland is not a marrying man, or at least will not be a marrying man for many a long year. He will wait till he can lay hold of an heiress, and free himself from Julia's trammels" (to him Lady Julia's plan had never been confided)—“that's what

Hartland will do. He is never dreaming of one of our girls. Rosamund had the sense to see as much, and take up with a good-looking fellow who could marry her off-hand, and be indebted to no one. Nice, bright girls those sisters of his, too. I was just beginning to feel a little more cheerful, and the house to be a little less doleful, and we might have got along very pleasantly as we were, if Rosamund had only held her tongue. Even if she did mean to cast him off in the long-run, she need not have been in such a precious hurry about it. She might have waited till she was better. She might have thought about me. But no; it is self, self, self all round. No one, not even my own daughter, thinks of me. And the upshot is, that here am I, stranded afresh, with no one to talk to, no one to have my dinner with, no music, no anything! Dr Makin says Rosamund is ill. She may well be ill. She has made herself ill. Julia is no more good as a nurse and guardian than a potato-stalk. I should not

wonder if the old goose were at the bottom of it all, either. I don't fancy she cared for Gilbert much more than Caroline did. Between them, they have made a mess of the whole business. All concluded without my sanction, without even any reference to me ! I—I—upon my word, if this is going to be the way in future, I might almost—almost as well——” and he just stopped short of saying, “I might almost as well have Lady Caroline back again.”

“And is it really true what I hear, Mr Stoneby ?” inquired Mrs Waterfield, on meeting the rector a few days afterwards ; “is the engagement really at an end ?”

“I am afraid so,” said he. After all that he had seen, supplemented by all that he had been told, “afraid” was hardly the right word ; but how seldom can one use the right word ! It stands in the background, and a cat's-paw answers the purpose.

“Do you know anything about it ?” pursued the lady, with the directness of the family friend.

"I believe that it was felt to have been entered into hastily, and it has come to as hasty a conclusion."

"It is on her side that it is broken off, of course?"

"On hers, yes."

"I thought not on his. I never saw a man more in love, in my life, than he was beforehand. I have not seen them together since. But I could fancy that, on closer acquaintance, he would not altogether suit the family. And Rosamund is capricious."

"She has felt it deeply."

"So she ought, Mr Stoneby."

"Oh—yes—of course."

"She has jilted him, you know, explain it as you will," said Mrs Waterfield, who was on easy terms with her clergyman; "that is the plain English word."

"I know," said Jack, quietly.

"Her illness is really the best thing for her reputation, poor child," continued Mrs Waterfield, softening. "It has been an unfortunate

affair ; and I thought Lady Caroline,—but, to be sure, Lady Caroline knew nothing about her children. Rosamund was an unknown personage to her mother—I always said so. Lady Caroline used to hint that I had my girls too much about me, made too much of them as companions, and gave them too much liberty ; but one thing I know, no daughter of mine would ever get as intimate with any acquaintance, as Rosamund Liscard did with Major Gilbert, without my knowledge and permission. Why, Lady Caroline's head was in the clouds, while he was paying her child the most open attentions beneath her very nose ! Then, when she did at last become aware of what every one else in the neighbourhood had known ages before, she thought she had nothing to do but to put her foot down on the affair to extinguish it ! She was, of all the women I ever knew, the most injudicious," concluded the speaker, with intense conviction.

"I think she was, Mrs Waterfield ; and her daughter now suffers for it."

“And what does the father say?”

“He is considerably put out,” said Jack, with a faint twinkle in his eye.

“Put out, is he?” and the lady noted the twinkle, and responded to it. “Put out? Not distressed, nor anxious, nor——”

“Mrs Waterfield, you know Mr Liscard.”

“Very well indeed, Mr Stoneby. That is, I thought I did once; but I am told—people do say that there is a new Mr Liscard beginning to rise out of the ashes of the old one, and with *him* I am certainly unacquainted. If this upset of the family arrangements has put an end to the novel order of things at King’s Common, no wonder he is ‘put out.’”

“You mean his driving the Miss Gilberts about?”

“And playing his flute to them—and—and other things.”

“They are bright, talkative, musical girls, you see, Mrs Waterfield.”

“I never saw them but the once,” responded

she, drily. "Talkative they were—the rest I must take on credit."

"At any rate, they are gone now."

"And gone in a hurry, I hear. Now, Mr Stoneby, I respect your reticence, and you are quite right not to tell me more than I have heard already,—but do not expect me to suppose that you, Lord Hartland's intimate friend, do not know a great deal more of this matter than you choose to discuss. I daresay I ought not to be inquisitive, but"—with a smile—"can a woman help it? And I do love Rosamund," added the speaker, who was warm-hearted after a fashion, "and I am truly grieved she is ill, and truly rejoice that she is well out of her engagement to Major Gilbert. I wonder now whether I ought to leave a card and inquiry at the Abbey? Perhaps Julia would as soon I did not; perhaps she would rather not be troubled with me just now. And living four miles off, we need not be supposed to know just yet. Still——" and she looked at Jack for inspiration.

He had none to offer.

“I daresay I should best show my goodwill and affection by staying away, the case being so very peculiar,” concluded Mrs Waterfield. “If I am to do to others as I would that they should do to me, I shall certainly not go near the place. What do you think?”

He thought he wished that he could do the like himself. If he could only have reflected as comfortably that he also might show his affection and goodwill best by staying away, how thankful he would have been!

He had not once met nor spoken to Hartland since their last never-to-be-forgotten interview. They had avoided each other by tacit, mutual consent, and were alike aware of having done so. It was Clementina who had been sent for to hear in confidence from Lady Julia of Major Gilbert’s dismissal and Rosamund’s increased illness,—and at first her brother had understood that he was to take no notice, and pursue his way as though nothing had happened.

But the confidence was now four days old, and he felt that as rector of the parish, living within half a mile of the Abbey, he could not with decency absent himself longer for the sake of appearances. He need not ask to be admitted. An inquiry at the door would serve all purposes; and should Lord Hartland see him, and wish to avoid him, he himself would make escape for any one easy, by looking neither to right nor to left either on his way thither or on his return.

“If I had had any plausible pretext for not coming,” muttered Jack, as with leaden foot he slowly moved up to the front door, “I should never have set a foot within the precincts. I hate seeming to push forward, and be the first to hear the news, and all that sort of thing. Evidently Hartland does not want to see me——”

“Come along,” said Hartland’s voice behind him, “come along. I thought you would be up to-day. Come in. I am at home, if no one else is.”

“I did not expect to see any one.”

“You will not—excepting me.”

“Lady Julia is engaged, I suppose?”

“She is in—my cousin’s room.”

“And how—tell me truly, Hartland—how is she?” At once he saw that he was to be allowed to speak, to inquire, and to be frank.

“She is almost as ill as she can be,” said Hartland.

“And you can say it so! Are you serious? You cannot be serious. Can you possibly say that, and——?”

“I feel as if I could say anything.”

His friend glanced at him. “I think you are ill too,” he said.

“I am not. I wish I were.”

“You are very unlike yourself, and no wonder. After all you have gone through——”

“All *I* have gone through! For heaven’s sake, let us have none of that!” cried Hartland, with a harsh laugh. “Your pardon, Jack; but don’t let me hear you say that

again. *I* have ‘gone through’ nothing. *I* have not been dissected for a woman’s amusement, and made sport of for her vanity. *I* have not——”

“No, to be sure; no, *I* was wrong: my dear old fellow,” said Stoneby, beginning to perceive what he had to do,—“my dear Hartland, you are quite right. But you are not going to say things now, for which you will be sorry presently——”

——“Why not? Why should *I* not say them? We have all taken leave to say anything up here nowadays, don’t you know? Rosamund says one thing one day, and another the next. She——”

——“You tell me she is very ill,” said Stoneby, slipping his arm through his friend’s. “When people are ill, you know, Hartland, one must be patient and gentle with them. You would not be unkind to—to your cousin——”

“Oh, no—oh dear, no—not for worlds. That is *her* privilege. She——”

“Hartland, this is unmanly and cowardly. You would not further bruise a crushed leaf——”

——“Bah! Don’t preach, Jack.”

Stoneby was silent. He was not offended, but he was startled, inexpressibly startled: he perceived more and more clearly, by every word uttered, that the speaker was saying that for which he was at the moment scarcely accountable, that his mental condition was unhinged and overwrought, and that he was in no fit state to be argued with, or irritated even by a calm dissent. More, he ought not to be trusted by himself. At such a crisis, tact, patience, and infinite sympathy were imperative, and here had he been grudging, or at all events withholding, all three. His hanging back during the past four days seemed now the height of selfishness;—and reflecting that during that time, a time when sympathy and beguilement had been most needed, his friend had been bereft even of Lady Julia to talk to—for she had been almost

wholly engrossed by the sick-room—he could only be thankful that at least he had not suffered himself to delay another day.

“If I am not to be allowed to speak,” proceeded Hartland, sullenly——

——“Speak as much as ever you will—as much as ever you please—only let us be alone and unheard,” whispered Stoneby, for they were now crossing the hall. “But you are excited, and your voice travels farther than you are aware of,” in an undertone. “Why should we go there?” as his host turned the handle of the drawing-room door; “that is too public a place, is it not? Can’t we go and sit in the library——”

“The library!” echoed Hartland, starting back with an oath. “The library! Don’t you know what happened there? Don’t you know a spectre haunts the place? I tell you that if I went in now, I should see him standing before me—she told me where he stood, and how he looked—and, O God! what he heard! She will tell you too, if

you ask her. Women can tell anything. She thought it must have been very 'sad and painful' for him! She was really 'very sorry about it.' Faugh! She would have said the same if he had cut his little finger. Oh that it should have come about thus! That no one had even the face to go openly to the poor wretch, and say 'There, take that,' and strike him down in front! That it should have been dribbled out through the leaking of a careless tongue! Let fall as a bit of news! Something dropped by the way! Yes,—come along, come along, and we'll go somewhere else and be alone, but not"—pushing roughly past—"not in by that door."

CHAPTER XXXV.

“PROMISE THAT YOU WILL BUT WAIT.”

“Above thy head, through rifted clouds, there shines
A glorious star. Be patient. Trust thy star.”

—*The Spanish Student.*

A FEW hours later on the same day saw Mr Stoneby seeking admission at Major Gilbert's quarters at Longminster. He was admitted, although he could perceive that Gilbert came forward with an effort, that he was hurried and nervous, and evidently received with reluctance a visitor whom it was impossible to avoid.

For this, however, Jack had been prepared, well aware that the sight of any one connected either with the Abbey or King's Common

could be no agreeable one to the unfortunate soldier, and he resolved to lose no time in extenuation of a visit so untimely.

“You are busy?” he began, glancing round.

“Packing up,” said Gilbert, succinctly. “I am going on leave.”

“So I see. I ought not to have intruded at such a late hour, but I trust—I am sure that you will pardon me when I am able to explain my business——”

“Oh, certainly. Sit down, Mr Stoneby,” and there was another obvious effort to be disengaged and courteous. “You won’t mind if I go on with my work,” emptying a drawer which stood open. “I always see to these things myself; and as I have given up the rooms——” he stopped and pretended to have lost an article, for the admission was inadvertent, and might have caused surprise.

“When you want a thing done, do it yourself, is your motto? I followed it to-night when I came here,” said his visitor, with a faint smile. “The fact is, Major Gilbert, I am

anxious about a parishioner of mine, who is in great trouble——”

—— “In trouble, is he? Poor devil! What is it? A broken leg? Rent to pay? Or what?”

“No. His trouble is not of that sort.”

“It is of a sort that a fiver or a tenner will heal, anyway?”

“I am afraid not.”

“Not indeed?”

“It is not money he is in need of.”

“Amazing! I thought it was always money a poor man was in need of.”

“But my parishioner is not a poor man.”

“Eh? oh! . . . It is not one of my fellows who has been getting into mischief over there, is it?” said Gilbert, sharply. “And you are come to beg him off? I hope not. I——”

“No, you are wrong again. And your time is too valuable to be spent in guessing riddles. It is on Lord Hartland’s account I am come.”

At the name Gilbert's face changed, and his colour rose.

"Oh," he said, shortly, "I thought you said 'a parishioner' ? Well, he is that, of course, but it misled me. But are you sure that you have any message from Lord Hartland to me ? I think there must be some mistake. I hardly think he would send one," with an emphasis that was instantly intelligible. "Had Lord Hartland had anything to say, surely he would have come in his own person to say it."

"He did not send me, nor does he know I am come here ; but I have sufficient trust in your generosity to feel confident that you would have blamed me had I hung back."

Gilbert inclined his head ; he had ceased to touch a thing from the moment Hartland's name had been pronounced.

"It would be useless for me to affect ignorance of what has happened this week," said the young clergyman, quietly. "I know, of course, all. I have come straight from the Abbey, Major Gilbert. Lord Hartland is

nearly beside himself with grief and indignation, and the most vehement remorse——”

—— “Remorse!” said Gilbert, starting. “Remorse, did you say? But”——and he regarded the speaker with keenly searching eyes——“but I was not aware that Lord Hartland had any cause for remorse,” he added, slowly.

“On my word as a Christian gentleman, he has none,” said his companion, raising his hand to enforce the asseveration, “but he thinks he has. He thinks that what took place might have been prevented if he——”

“Absurd,” said Gilbert. “I am obliged to him, but as if anything he could have said or done could have influenced my affairs! My affairs are my own——”

“Hear me out. You are on the wrong track. Hartland does not presume to think he could have done or undone any of this——this——what I mean, what really preys on his mind is that you should have been——that she should have allowed you——”

——“No need to mention her,” said Gilbert, sternly.

“The fact is,” said poor Stoneby, who began to perceive how difficult his task was likely to prove, and who had as yet got no nearer his real object,—“the fact is, that she is so seriously ill, his anxiety for her has completely unhinged him——”

——“Anxiety for her! I begin to understand. And his ‘vehement remorse’ too! But I was told—Rosamund herself told me,—no, she did not tell me, but her aunt did, and she endorsed it,—that Hartland was nothing to her. I was solemnly assured——”

——“He *is* nothing to her—but—but she is all the world to him.”

Gilbert fell back, and his hand dropped by his side.

“Yes, Major Gilbert, that is it; that is God’s truth about Hartland. His cousin knows it not—no one knows it but myself—but it is so. He has buried his secret in his own breast.”

“Then, Mr Stoneby, kindly tell me this. What is the remorse for? And with what does your friend reproach himself?” demanded Gilbert, folding his arms, and leaning across a small table, while he fixed his eyes, burning like coals of fire, upon his companion. “Surely he had as good a right as I to enter the lists? The lists were free to all.”

“I am afraid,” said Stoneby, reluctantly, “that it was not until after you——”

“Ha! I see. But still, unless he played me false——”

“That he did not.”

“Then what, in the name of heaven, does he reproach himself for?”

“He thinks he had no right to love her.”

“That is folly. He had a right to love as much as he chose, so long as—— Can you swear that he never gave her any reason to suppose it? That he never sought to undermine me? Never tempted her away

from me? Never let her know that a coronet awaited her acceptance——”

——“Never,—before heaven I swear it, Major Gilbert,—never!”

“How do you know, Mr Stoneby?” said Gilbert, contemptuously. “Was Hartland likely to tell you? You are his father confessor, I daresay; but people do keep back little things, trifles, even at confession, they say; and a man in love——” he stopped.

“Shall I tell you how I know?” said Stoneby, rising and standing before him. “When a man talks of himself and of you as Hartland has done to me this day,—when he refuses even to look upon the place whereon you stood that morning,—when he almost curses the two women, whom he loves best in the world, for what they have done,—and curses himself again for that which he has *not* done,—do you think that such a man, at such a time, would cheat me with a lie?”

“You mean that he is unnerved,” said

Gilbert, but it was evident that he was more struck than he chose to own. “I should not have supposed Lord Hartland would have been so easily shaken. And if it be as you say, that he has nothing on his conscience, he can surely afford to——”

“A man who *had* had something on his conscience would not, I think, have been half so deeply moved,” replied Stoneby. “No one capable of playing another false, would view the idea with the horror Hartland does. You smile? Major Gilbert, I know and love Lord Hartland as a brother. I could answer for him as I could for no other living man. It is because he is so upright, honourable——”

“Spare me the recital of his virtues,” said Gilbert, drily. “I have a regard for Lord Hartland, and I am glad to find his conduct does not necessitate its withdrawal, since,” —and he passed his hand across his brow, —“since I am willing to take your word that it is so. But an eulogium on a rival is

hardly—if you will excuse my saying so—is not quite in taste at the present moment. You say he loves his cousin,”—he turned away his head—“in time she will love him too,” he added, to himself.

Stoneby was silenced.

“You said something about some one being ill,” continued Gilbert, returning to his papers, and affecting to recommence arranging them ; “it is not serious, not dangerous, I hope ? ”

“It is very serious. Until yesterday evening, I believe, it was thought dangerous.”

“Who is with her ? Who attends her ? Not only that——”

“A consulting physician came down from London yesterday, and he will see her again to-morrow.”

“Is it as bad as that ? ” said Gilbert, in a lowered tone. “I had not heard. I—to be sure I did hear she had been worse, but I thought, I fancied it was as it had been before, made more of than the reality warranted.”

“At any rate there is no exaggeration now,”

said Mr Stoneby, in answer to the bitter smile which accompanied the words ; and by which he could perceive that the cause of the exaggeration had been now divined. “They hope the most critical period is past, but a relapse would be most certainly fatal.”

“Is it brain fever—or what?”

“Of that nature.”

“I am going abroad,” said Gilbert, after a pause. “I start to-night. But my sisters are—here is their address,” writing it hastily down. “I should be grateful if you would send me a single line now and again, which they could forward. I am ashamed to trouble you——”

——“Trouble!” said Jack Stoneby, with emotion. “Major Gilbert, I have not dared—I do not dare to intrude upon your sorrow, but——” and he held out his hand with a look that supplied the rest.

“Thanks,” said the soldier, briefly.

The two men faced each other for a moment as their hands met, but Gilbert did not then

know that here was another bound to him by that same secret link wherewith Hartland had been. "May I hope to be pardoned coming to-night?" said Jack, very humbly. It was hardly night, but the darkness of December at six o'clock made the term seem appropriate.

"Certainly. I respect a man who does what he conceives to be his duty. Even though I do not quite understand your object, I allow, Mr Stoneby."

"I hoped for a word—a message of confidence—something to enable my friend to take a less distorted view of his own conduct. If he goes on brooding over every unhappy circumstance, and encouraging his own morbid fancies, I cannot answer for the consequences. He is in a strange state, and my mind misgave me when I left him just now. Major Gilbert, if anything were to happen to Lord Hartland, you would never forgive yourself if you had refused to send what I now ask for—a single kind, forgiving, believing word."

Gilbert winced, and drew his brows to-

gether. “A kind word is easily spoken,” he said, “and I forgive him, as I hope to be forgiven; but,”—and he moved uneasily,—“it is hard to be called upon to place implicit faith in a friend who—who is more fortunate than yourself.”

“It is hard. God bless you for trying to do it. It is so hard, that if I did not myself believe heart and soul in Hartland’s honour, I could never ask it of you. But I know him better than he knows himself. I know what it will be to him to have to lie under this stigma in your eyes——”

——“Does he expect to marry her?” said Gilbert, abruptly.

“He says he will never ask her.”

“But you think——?”

——“I think that unless you say something now to clear him in his own sight, he will hold to this resolution.”

“I am to acquit Lord Hartland in order to leave him free to do the thing whereof he is acquitted?”

“You are to free him from a state of unreal misery and self-deception, because you are a just man,” said Stoneby, steadily. “You are to lift a burden off his back, because it has no right to be there. No one but you can perform this labour of love, and as God’s minister, I call on you to do it. I tell you that Lord Hartland is suffering from an overstrained sense of his share in your wrongs. His share ! No share in that wrong accrues to him any more than it does—to me,” suddenly added the young man, a blaze of light upon his pale countenance. “Look here, Major Gilbert—you must, you shall be convinced by me when I tell you that I too love Rosamund Liscard. I loved her before you did—before Hartland did—before, long, long before I knew it myself. I have never, by word or sign—all will bear me witness—I have never betrayed myself. Hartland never suspected it—you never suspected it. What then ? Am I to afflict myself with cruel doubts and shame because of what I was powerless to prevent ? Yet what has Hartland

done, that I have not done ? It is for my friend's sake I now yield up this secret ; but I feel that knowing it, and acquitting me, as I know you must do, of every dishonourable thought, you cannot in justice withhold the same acquittal from another.”

“Don't you see, Stoneby,” said Gilbert in a low voice, “that there is a difference ? My poor fellow,”—and he went up and put a hand upon the speaker's shoulder,—“my poor fellow, you—and—I—are one. Hartland is not with us. He——” he stopped.

——“Yes ?”

“We have no hope,” said Gilbert, calmly. “He has . . . You are a good man,” proceeded he, after a long silence. “I believe in religion of this sort. It is, of course, rather strange and confusing to me to find another on the ground, and I must, as you say, allow you have never in any way given rise to suspicion of your feelings ; but—well—I will try to think the same of Lord Hartland. I wish him no ill. Nay, since I must, I will endeav-

our to feel that I have no just cause to bear him a grudge ; but I must say this,—I hope—I do hope that, for his own sake, he will not marry Rosamund.”

Nothing had been gained by the visit.

The next point to be considered was, should Hartland know of it or not ? His friend decided that unless point-blank questions were put to him, he would say nothing of the matter ; and as it was most unlikely that he should be cross-examined, the step having been an improbable one, he had not much fear of being unable to keep it to himself.

As luck would have it, however, while yet little more than half-way home, the pedestrian was overtaken by one of the light dog-carts belonging to the Abbey, driven by Hartland's own particular groom,—and the man, recognising the rector of the parish, at once drew rein. The night was dark and misty ; Jack was tired and chilled. He reflected that whether or not he should accept the offer of a lift, the man's master would probably hear

that it had been made, and where he had been met ; and hunger and fatigue clamouring this view of the case into his ears, up he got, begging to be set down at a roadside cottage hard by the rectory gate—he did not care to run the risk of finding Lord Hartland sitting with his sister, within his own four walls.

Diplomacy thrown away. He was in the act of dismounting, when he was hailed for the second time that day unexpectedly, by Hartland’s own voice.

Hartland was standing by a wayside pool, while his dog was dabbling among the weeds.

“I vacate to you,” said Jack, as lightly as he could, and springing down almost before the eager horse could be brought to a standstill. “You’ll get in, will you not? You are rather late for Lady Julia’s dinner as it is?”

“Is it dinner-time?” said Hartland, dreamily.

It was long past, but neither was aware of it.

“I came down here for a walk,” continued the speaker, in the same tone. “I have not had much of a walk to-day. There’s nowhere to go. No, I shan’t get in.” (To the groom.) —“Go on home. I’ll follow directly. I suppose I must,” he sighed, under his breath.

“Come in with me,” said his friend. “My dinner, such as it is, is no doubt ready, and——Wait a moment, Robert” —as the dog-cart was moving off—“if you will stop and dine with us, just send word, Hartland, won’t you?” he added, judging Lady Julia’s feelings by his own.

“Oh, I’ll stop, of course,” replied Hartland, in the same dreary accents. “I’m thankful to stop anywhere. Tell him so; and I say, come along in out of this beastly cold wind,” shivering. “Take me in with you, Stoneby; and I say, tell them to send a close carriage for me, when they send. I hate this cold, night air,” he murmured, plaintively.

There was no wind, and to Stoneby the night did not appear more chilly than usual;

but he understood. “Yes, let us get indoors sharp,” he said.

He was now glad he had got his friend safe under his eye. Since his first appearance had provoked no comment, he feared nothing, and trusted to food and warmth and resolute cheerfulness while Clementina was by, and the unrestraint of affectionate intercourse subsequently, to doing what could be done in the way of soothing and cheering.

“You must take what you find,” he said, stepping inside. “This may be mutton-chop day—and if so, you are lucky. Yesterday was mince day. I don’t look upon mince day with equal favour, I confess. To-morrow is Sunday’s beef—hot on Saturday, cold on Sunday, demolished on Sunday night. If we did not send it well round among the sick folks, we should not see the end of that beef till the middle of the week, so I hit upon the dodge—oh, here is my sister.”

“How soon you are back!” cried she, running out into the hall at the sound of

his voice. "Have you really been in and out of Longminster in this time——"

"Never mind, never mind. Here is something much more important. Here is Lord Hartland come to dinner. What have you got for dinner?"

"Only mutton-chops," said Clementina, with a somewhat rueful visage. "I did not know exactly when you would be back from Longminster——"

"Longminster?" echoed Hartland, as though struck by the second repetition of the name. "Longminster?" And he looked from one to the other.

"Yes, I have just been in on—on business. It did not take me long,——" and the host hung up his hat, and began to take off his coat, as if the admission were nothing.

"But you did not say you were going, when you were with me. Did you mean then to go? We could have sent you over; we were sending anyway."

"Thanks. The walk was nothing."

“I would have walked with you——but no, I wouldn’t. Longminster?” repeated the speaker, suddenly. “What were you doing in Longminster to-day? What did you go for? Whom did you see?”

“I said—I—well, Hartland, I said I went on business, you know.”

Vain effort. Hartland was now upon the scent, close and keen as a bloodhound, and his burning eye and twitching lip held out no hope of quitting it.

“Pshaw!” he exclaimed, impatiently. “What is the use of saying that? Business? Your business was with——”

——“Yes—you are right—it was. Wait but one moment, till we are alone,” whispered his friend. “One moment, dear Hartland. Come in here,” opening the door of the little sitting-room, which was, as it happened, deep in shadow, though not shuttered-in for the night. “What! no lights, no fire——”

“You can have both directly, brother, but we are to dine in the study, and it is all

bright and comfortable in there. I had said we should not want the drawing-room to-night,——” began the attentive little sister, but she was cut short ere she could explain domestic arrangements further.

——“Never mind—it will do well enough,” said Jack.

“But do come in to the study,” pursued Clementina, opening the door, from which instantly streamed forth brightness and warmth, —“see how comfortable it looks! Do, Lord Hartland, come in here. Here, Jack,” as no one moved to obey.

For the light was, truth to tell, undesired by either; and Hartland, to whom it was even an annoyance, now made so peremptory and involuntary an advance into the less tempting chamber, that it was plain nothing could be done for him in the way of creature-comfort. “Just like a man,” murmured little Clemmy to herself; “when they are ill, or unhappy, they always will be uncomfortable too. Jack is exactly the same——” and she had to respond

to Jack's significant glance over his shoulder, and nod in answer to it, and trot off to the kitchen to delay the cooking of the chops, and feel all the while that if she had been at the helm, and had had the management of Lord Hartland's affairs, she would have contrived infinitely better,—she would have seen to it that he had first of all a good dinner (though it were a plain one), a good dinner, and a glass of good wine, and then his chair wheeled round to the fire, and some nice coffee or tea brought to him, over which he could confide his troubles comfortably,—instead of allowing him to turn in to that dismal drawing-room, with the blinds still up, and there, all tired and fasting as he was, plunge into an anxious interview. For she could see with half an eye what the interview was likely to be, and “Men are so stupid,” concluded the little soul, shaking her head over them both.

But perhaps Jack was sometimes as wise as she.

He had heard that in his friend's voice, and

seen that in his face, which told him that delay might be as dangerous as evasion was hopeless ; and felt that all which now remained for him to do, was to be as brief and as satisfactory as was possible. Alas ! no real satisfaction was possible.

“Hartland,” he began, however, “you are right, quite right, in what I perceive to be your conjecture. You suppose I went to see Gilbert ? I did. And I saw him. He is on the eve of departure from Longminster. He goes to-morrow, and——”

——“Get on—get on. There is something more than this. You went to him for more than this. You went——?” and he looked the rest.

“I went because of what you told me just now. Forgive me if I should not have done so, but——”

“Oh, it’s all right. I am glad, on the whole, you did. Do you know, I am glad you did. What did you say ? What did he say ? Did you—did he——? What does he think of

me? But why need I ask?” he suddenly wheeled round. “What *can* he think? You need not be afraid to say. Speak out plainly. Oh, it will not hurt me; and what if it does? It is only what I ought to expect; of course he will abuse me——”

“He did not abuse you. On the contrary he——”

——“Well?”

“He was most moderate and calm. I never thought to have felt myself so constrained to admire——”

——“Ah! we know all that. That’s the old thing over again. We are all constrained to admire,—and then—some of us break down. Now look here, Stoneby; I must know, and I will know exactly, what passed between you and Gilbert this afternoon. You cannot refuse to tell me, and until I hear——” his haggard, expectant gaze supplied the rest.

“I will tell you all, Hartland.”

“You fancied that Gilbert took it that he owed his dismissal to you,” proceeded the

speaker after a moment's pause, "and that in consequence he doubted your integrity——"

"Oh, doubted my integrity! My good fellow, say he thought me a blackguard. We want plain words now."

"I was able to give him my solemn assurance you were not."

"He did think it, then?" quickly.

"He had not known what to think. Evidently the idea had been presented to him, and had been dismissed. He had been twice told that there was nothing between you and your cousin——"

"Who had told him?"

"Lady Julia and Miss Liscard herself."

"Had they? Had they? But how then ——" his face fell heavily. "It is only on that understanding, is it, that I am to be exonerated? You had to assure them that there was nothing, and never would be anything, between us? And Rosamund, had she done so too? Oh, I daresay he will forgive me, if he has her word for *that*? He——"

——“I don’t think he had had her word for that. Indeed, from what he let fall, I gathered that he had had no one’s word for anything of the kind. To tell the truth, Hartland, I fancy that he still fears, still looks upon you as a rival, and as a probably successful one in the future.”

“Oh!” there was a perceptible alteration of tone.

“In which case, you can hardly wonder if he is a little difficult to convince just at present.”

“He was difficult, was he?”

“Yes.”

“Well? Go on.”

“Gilbert has been accustomed to think for himself, and judge for himself; and though after a time he was willing to acknowledge in a form of words that he had no just cause to bear you a grudge, I own that I felt his heart scarcely went with his lips. He did not seem to understand, and perhaps he could hardly be expected to understand, how you could feel as

you do without having direct cause for doing so. I had told him of your grief and——”

——“And shame,” said Hartland, emphatically. “I am ashamed—ashamed ; and I care not who knows it. I feel as if we had all bitten the dust before this man. He is above us all, and may look down upon us all. It is that which cuts, Stoneby. If only we had played him fair——”

“Do you not see, Hartland, that you are taking on your shoulders a burden which—forgive my saying so—only belongs to another?”

“If you mean Rosamund,” said Hartland, quickly, “I—I—not a word against Rosamund. The poor girl is punished enough. You would not have her—you would not talk of her—I—I mean—let her alone.”

“So I will ; but as you have identified yourself in a measure with her, and suffer accordingly, you cannot wonder that Gilbert thinks your share in the wrong done him——”

——“I told you I had no share. Stoneby,

I told you, before heaven, I was guiltless. You ought to have assured Gilbert of this. Why, good heavens!—did you allow him to think——”

Stoneby strove to be patient.

“No, Hartland, I allowed him to think nothing that was not true. But you had yourself made the task so difficult, that I was obliged to be content without accomplishing my chief end. I was forced to leave Gilbert to reconcile as best he might, your feelings of a criminal with your protestations of being an innocent man. You can yourself perceive that this was not an easy thing to do; but after all, what matter? He will do it some day. Some day, in time, when the first shock has passed away, he will be able to see more clearly, and to do you justice. My assurances will recur to his mind. He will remember those of others likewise, and his nobler nature will assert itself; the time will surely come when you will be as clear in his eyes as you are in those of all others.”

“If I am not,” said Hartland, bitterly, “I will never, so help me Heaven——”

“Hartland, not another word. Rash vows are easily made, and hang like millstones round the neck thereafter. Say nothing—do nothing—for the present. Remember that one week ago you would have given the world to have had matters as they are now. Then be thankful; be patient; and *wait*.”

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LADY JULIA'S LITTLE PLAN.

“ I delight in the tender passions, and would befriend all under their influence.”—*The Duenna*.

A MELANCHOLY and dreary time now set in for all connected with those in whom we are interested, with one exception, and that exception was Miss Catharine Liscard.

Catharine, as we know, was a young person with a natural aptitude for turning events, whether of joy or sorrow to those around her, to her own advantage ; and she had early seen the strong points of the present situation.

In Lady Caroline's day, and in Rosamund's day, Catharine had been nowhere—a demure puss, creeping about in the background ;

occasionally emitting sparks, it is true, which might have enlightened more watchful eyes, but which had been passed over by those two dominant spirits, each too much taken up with her own whims and projects to give a moment to the supposition that a younger and feebler member of the family, could also have a mind of her own.

Catharine had bided her time.

On the death of her mother she had made some faint, wavering, and uncertain attempts at coming forward, making herself useful, and sliding into a more prominent position; but Rosamund had been in no mood to allow of indulgences and encroachments at that time. Everything which had savoured of a reflection on the old customs, and an overturning of the set routine, had been promptly quelled, and Catharine had at first made no way.

Then she had tried making friends with Gilbert, and been more successful. She had more than once taken him off her sister's hands, enabled Rosamund to slip away to

solitude when only she could have done so, and established a claim on the latter's gratitude which had borne fruit. When she had been permitted to dine late on the night of Emily's and Henrietta's arrival, the ice had been really broken.

All the rest had been easy. She had made a slip in looking ungenial on the first symptoms of a more jocose dinner-table than was usual—and that on the first occasion of her presiding over it—but the error had been quickly retrieved; and although another momentary check had been received on the abrupt cessation of the frolicsome succeeding week, she had again found her opportunity in the reaction which had followed.

Dear papa could not dine alone—could not drive about alone—could not have a long, dull evening alone. She had so much enjoyed dear papa's music; and had practised an accompaniment on purpose to please him, so surely now he would not refuse to hear it? What could dear papa do but agree, and listen to her care-

fully prepared chit-chat, and, in spite of himself, be drawn into ordering the phaeton round and bringing out the flute?

Certes, Catharine was better than nobody. And though one's own schoolgirl daughter is no great thing, and a poor exchange for a lively, bantering, roguish young lady visitor, still, when the one is not to be had, it is as well to put up with the other,—and by degrees Mr Liscard found it so.

For one thing, Catharine, conscious of the feeble tenure by which she held her present high estate, took infinitely greater pains to amuse and gratify her parent than any other member of the house ever had thought of taking with Lady Caroline's husband—for in that light he had always been regarded.

Catharine was not only invariably good-humoured and attentive and at his service, but she had little ingratiating offices at command, and little affectionate flatteries on the tip of her tongue whenever opportunity offered. Through her he learned that Mrs

Twopenny, the baker's wife, thought him the youngest-looking gentleman of his years she had ever known ; and that Mrs Jenkins at the home farm had heard he had such a power of learning, that she was afraid so much as to let fall a word before him.

He had her own assurance of his talents as a whip, coupled with the compliments on the same subject left behind by Emily Gilbert. He heard that he never looked so well as on the box-seat of his phaeton, and that he managed the spirited pair so beautifully that no one need ever be nervous when driven by him.

Naturally the spirited pair came to the door the next day, and Catharine was driven wherever she wanted to go.

Again, with a diligence which neither love of the art nor fear of Miss Penrose had ever been able to incite, the dutiful daughter now mastered such simple ditties as a flute very much out of practice could accomplish ; and as Mr Liscard was really fond of music for its own sake, and had only been discouraged from

cultivating it by Lady Caroline's persistent inattention and ignorance, there was no doubt that a resource against *ennui* had now been hit upon.

To Catharine it was, for the present, joy enough merely to play the grown-up person ; to sit in the vast saloon and have coffee handed to her along with her father ; and to stay up at night until she chose to go to bed.

For this she would have paid a much heavier price than merely drumming on the piano for an hour or so daily ; and when, with an easy air, she one day found herself asking for the loan of her father's purse as they drove through the streets of Longminster, and subsequently shopping with it, here and there, all over the place, without his remonstrating, or even seeming to observe what she was about —(so taken up was he with himself, his horses, and his horsemanship)—her cup was full, and ran over.

What was it to her that her sister, the beauty, the pride of the neighbourhood, lay

slowly recovering from the brink of death, feeble, wasted, helpless, unable for the slightest exertion of mind or body, the bloom on her cheeks faded, the round, healthy limbs shrunk and almost powerless, the once vigorous spirit like that of a little child ?

Catharine would answer all inquiries in her most cheerful accents.

“Rosamund is ever so much better, thank you. Yes, isn't it a pity she has had to have her hair cut off? But I daresay it will soon grow again.” Or, “Aunt Julia says Rosamund is doing as well as we could possibly expect. We have just been to the Abbey. Some of us go over nearly every day.” Or, “Rosamund always liked being with Aunt Julia. I daresay she would rather be ill at the Abbey than anywhere else.”

If interrogated as to the probable duration of the sick girl's recovery, Catharine would occasionally astonish her interrogator. “When will Rosamund be fit to come home? *Oh dear*, not for a long, *long* time yet. We have

not even seen her yet. Oh, we have not thought about her coming home at all. Aunt Julia says she does not know in the least when she will be fit to be moved even downstairs,—and as for leaving the Abbey, Aunt Julia will keep her as long as ever she possibly can.” And it was tolerably obvious that if Aunt Julia were to keep the sick girl altogether, one person at least would find no fault with the arrangement.

“The way that ridiculous Catharine is getting the upper hand in that poor, neglected house, really annoys me more than I can tell!” exclaimed Mrs Waterfield one day, on returning from King’s Common, where Catharine had done the honours with an alacrity and solicitude more than creditable as a performance, but which did not answer so well with every one as with her docile papà. “I confess that to see that mere child sitting perked up in the drawing-room in an afternoon, ordering about, and taking the management of everything—she who ought to be

at her grammar and her geography, and would never have been visible at all, had her poor mother or Rosamund been about—it is quite too much for me. The child is insufferable. I cannot think where she picked up all that manner. Rosamund had not an atom of it—not at any time,—she was as charming and simple as possible, even when she had begun to be noticed, and made much of; and, for a wonder, Lady Caroline had the wisdom not to try to improve her. But Catharine is a born actress and diplomatist. Her coolness, her self-possession, the way in which she persecutes you with attentions and inquiries—and all the time with such evident satisfaction in her own perfect address, and *savoir faire*,—I scarcely know how to look. She is a detestable child,” quoth the speaker, with energy.

Rosamund, Mrs Waterfield had been unable to resist, in spite, perhaps, of an involuntary touch of envy, and wonder that the unamiable, uninviting Lady Caroline Liscard should have such a bright and radiant creature belonging

to her—but she could let herself out, as it were, about Catharine.

Catharine reigning at King's Common, in all the glory of solitude and prominence, and with obvious forecasting of gay doings and revelry by-and-by, was likely to have advantages and surroundings such as she could not hope to give her girls; and what was Catharine that she should merit such promotion? If her father went on as he had begun, indeed, the young regent's reign might be short, though merry—but Mrs Waterfield did not under-rate the abilities of the astute damsel; she did not think that "dear papa" would find himself left altogether free to pick and choose his society. Already Catharine had made great strides in her ascendancy; and as he was a man certain sooner or later to fall once more under the dominion of petticoat government, if the daughter could only hold her ground for a time, she stood an excellent chance of having him completely under her thumb for the future.

No one would have been more indignant at all of this than Lady Julia, had Lady Julia not been entirely engrossed at this period by other and sweeter cares.

It had become all in all to her to nurse, and watch, and brighten, and support the feeble life now struggling back to youth and strength again. To mark the truant colour stealing once more over her darling's cheek, as the weeks rolled by; to note the little daily increase of appetite; to hail with delight the lengthened nightly slumbers; to provide dainties and delicacies, and cater amusement sufficiently simple and unexciting—the while in her heart she built anew her lately shattered castle in the air,—all of this afforded such a round of occupation as left neither time nor inclination for much outside the Abbey precincts. Her days were completely filled up, and, in consequence, she scarcely ever went to King's Common, and knew but little of what went on there.

When Catharine would jump down from

the phaeton, and run in to her aunt, all eagerness to know about the sort of night dear Rosamund had passed, and the sort of breakfast she had made, who could find a fault with that? When she would rejoin, in answer to her aunt's vague hints that it might be long before the invalid would be able to resume her wonted place as elder daughter and sister, that if only dear Rosamund's life were spared to them, they ought not to mind how long she was in getting well and coming home, nothing could be prettier.

The Gilberts, root and branch, eliminated, love and kindness for humankind once more returned to inhabit the tender-hearted Lady Julia's bosom — animosity and antagonism being foreign bodies in that soil; and overflowing as she was now with a thankful, tearful felicity, she only felt ready to pity all others not so happy as herself.

Catharine in consequence got off cheap.

She had but little to do. Her fervent in-

quires and congratulations, her ready acquiescence in any little scheme for her sister's comfort, and, above all, her protestations that all was going on well at King's Common, but that, of course, they were very dull, very quiet ("and very respectable, just as they should be," internally commented her auditor)—completely satisfied that good lady's mind: the consequence of which was, that the niece stood higher in her aunt's good graces at this period than she had ever done before—or, perhaps, was ever likely to do again.

The poor children, however, were no better off under the new *régime* than under the former ones. Their palmiest days had been, indeed, when Gilbert's influence was young, and had been exerted on their behalf; for now Catharine, flaunting in her new-born state, would no more be troubled with them than would Lady Caroline or Rosamund, and even they had not been more firmly convinced of the efficacy of schoolroom regulations, and the need for the whole remaining eight being

invariably kept out of sight and hearing, than was the barely emancipated pupil.

The only difference was that Catharine patronised Miss Penrose, which Rosamund had never done.

Rosamund had been sorry for the little governess, but she had not cared to seek her society; and in her rampant heyday, it is to be feared the wilful girl had done little she had not cared to do. Catharine, however, was now hand in glove with her late preceptress, who, in her turn, would not have been human if she had not enjoyed the turn things had thus taken.

Miss Penrose would be begged to come down to the drawing-room in the evenings, and hear the flute and latest duet—when we may be sure she praised the accompaniment also; she would be invited to accompany Catharine on her shopping expeditions to Longminster, when these came to be more frequent than dear papa cared for (and dear papa was never troubled to do anything for

which he really had a distaste at this time): so there, by Miss Catharine's side in the pony-carriage, though on a lower seat, would perch the little narrow strip of a governess, taking up next to no room, and feeling quite complacent—since, poor soul, the low seat was indubitably better than none at all, and a drive, and a peep at the gay windows, and helping Catharine to make purchases, and standing by while Catharine talked to acquaintances, better than droning on in that endless grind which had swallowed up so many years of her life at King's Common.

She never refused the holiday, or half-holiday, petitioned for by her late pupil, when the little band had been invited to the Abbey to run riot among Lady Julia's pets, and be stuffed with her good things,—but she and Catharine did not make up the party going there. They would be off to the town, to dressmakers, milliners, and what not—Miss Penrose to inspect and admire, Catharine to price and purchase. So many parcels had

never found their way to a carriage belonging to King's Common before.

All this time what was Hartland doing?

Getting acclimatised to the new order of things; beginning to be a little more cheerful, a little less silent; to take an imperceptibly growing interest in the state of the fields, the weather, the progress of the new farm-buildings, the stables, the kennels, the spring meetings, and the prospect of the cricketing season.

He was not quite so keen a cricketer as he had been a year or two before—but still he fancied he should not give up his team. He thought he should get together a few good horses, and go in for hunting the following season—there was a prospect of the hunt being improved, and he ought to encourage it. There was still a little shooting, and as Rosamund's condition continued to improve, shooting men came and went, and made some sort of variety. But still there was more needed.

“He requires an out-and-out thorough change,” said his friend Stoneby, one day. “You should pack Hartland off, Lady Julia. He is moping here.”

“My dear Mr Stoneby, *I* pack Hartland off! Why, nothing on earth would induce him to go. He will not stir from home; he has not slept a night away from the house since—you know when.”

“The very reason he should go now.”

“I am quite sure he will not go—until Rosamund is better.”

“She is out of all danger now, Lady Julia.”

“Oh, entirely, dear child; nothing but strength is needed. As soon as she is fit to travel, I propose taking her abroad. Why, to be sure”—and she stopped, and her whole face beamed—“to be sure, if Hartland would go with us——!”

——“No, no, not that,” said Mr Stoneby, smiling and shaking his head. “No, Lady Julia, that would not suffice. That would do no good at all,” added he, frankly, for he was

now drawn by a closer tie than ever to the Abbey inmates, and was known as "Hartland's dear, kind, invaluable friend" there. "Do you not understand," proceeded he, "that that sort of change would simply be no change? Hartland ought to leave behind him every familiar thought, and voice, and face. He ought to breathe a completely new mental atmosphere. He needs this even more than a physical one. For that very reason I have not offered myself——"

——"Oh, if you would!"

"It would not answer; it would not serve our end, Lady Julia. Let him shake off for the time every one and everything with which is connected a painful association. Let him go over the seas, right away—say to America, across the Rocky Mountains, camp out in the Far West—you will have him come back another man. Before he knows, he will find himself disencumbered of all the cobwebs which the last six months have spun around him. He will knock up new acquaintance-

ships ; form new interests ; insensibly drop his melancholy, and—wonder what has become of his liver. I assure you, Lady Julia, a great deal of the gloom which still overshadows Hartland—though it has lightened much of late—is due to a very prosaic and explicable cause. He is capricious about his food, and neglects his hours. Then, for a long time, he took not a third of his usual exercise. Then, he has had no society——”

“Very true indeed,” assented poor Lady Julia, as meekly as if she had been to blame for it all ; “but, Mr Stoneby, he is so much better than he was.”

“He *is* better : he is getting over it,” replied Jack ; “and for that very reason he is fit to go off by himself, and to get all the good of so doing. We could not have trusted him alone till now.”

“And he was too anxious,” and she shot him a glance.

“Yes, of course. To have left you in your anxiety would have been unfeeling——”

“Oh, Mr Stoneby, you know what I mean.”

“You mean that he was unhappy on his own account?”

“I am sure, certain, that he cares for her. And I had so hoped that when she was able to be down-stairs and about, and when they could see each other quietly every day, and she could get to know him and appreciate him—oh, you know, I think you know, what is my greatest hope and prayer——” and the fond, imprudent creature clasped her hands, while the water stood in her eyes.

“My dear lady,” said Jack, quietly, “has it ever struck you that perhaps, in the old days, if this event which you so earnestly desire had not been put in motion, and prepared for as it were, it might already have come to pass of itself? Believe me, it does not do to try to pull the strings of destiny——”

“We only thought it would be so nice,” murmured she.

Who could proceed with a lecture after that?

“Certainly you understand Hartland as no one else does,” conceded Lady Julia, recovering herself; “and Rosamund is not—of course—poor darling, she is thin, and pale, and fragile-looking; and with all her beautiful hair gone, she cannot look her best. It *might* be as well that Hartland should not see her just now.”

“Quite as well,” assented Jack, profoundly.

“She will soon be every bit as pretty—as beautiful as ever,” added Lady Julia, jealousy in arms at once. “People are very much mistaken who think she is going to be a poor, pale invalid for the rest of her life. Still—for the present, we must be thankful to have her as she is. And if you think Hartland should really go——” and she sighed a sigh of resignation.

It was a little hard to have to give up all the cosy prospect of Rosamund as the most interesting of convalescents, making daily progress under Hartland’s care;—she had pictured fresh spring mornings, and had seen the two sauntering hither and thither in the sunshine,

she leaning her fragile form upon his stalwart arm, he bending over, all pride and protection, —she had seen the happy girl piloted in the broad, low, easy carriage, through green lanes and budding hedgerows — seen the hourly increase of tenderness on the one hand, and confidence on the other, finally ending in the glad avowal — all taking place in her own childhood's home, the home to be also theirs!

Still, if it would be best otherwise, who was she to rebel? Ultimately she decided to sound Hartland, and find out how he felt in the matter.

As she had foreseen, at first he would hear neither reason nor argument, and stood stoutly out against the idea. He had no need of anything of the kind. He was very well where he was. He was not in the mood for travel. If they liked, he would go up to town for a few days, presently. He would go to Liverpool and see the Grand National run. More than that he would not do.

But by degrees the continual droppings,

which are said to wear out a stone, had their effect.

Lady Julia, having been brought to perceive that the tempting vision of her two beloveds billing and cooing under her protecting wing, was not perhaps the most likely one to prove a reality, nor, if it did, to produce lasting happiness—since the one stood in scarcely less need of care than the other—ended by throwing herself heart and soul into Mr Stoneby's proposition ; was convinced because he was convinced, and resolute because he was resolute.

When Hartland was restored to full health and vigour, and Rosamund to her home and position—then would be the time for love-making proper to recommence. Her other scheme would now, she saw, with the usual adaptability of her sweet and pliable nature, be not without its drawbacks.

Accordingly she was full to the brim of assurances, and prognostications ; called in Mr Stoneby to supply arguments ; and got hope-

lessly entangled amidst wilds, deserts, and prairies.

The result, however, was all that was desired.

Hartland was off, and off without seeing his cousin.

“She did not ask to see him, nor he to see her,” Lady Julia explained to her confidential adviser, thereafter. “Why he did not, I cannot tell; but I think I can guess at dear Rosamund’s feelings. Poor child, she does so dislike the sight of herself in the glass. And I am sure a sweeter face—but the little frilled cap is rather trying. I cannot honestly say it is becoming, and I hope she will soon be able to dispense with it. Her hair is beginning to show again nicely, and will be quite lovely within a month or two. Still, I think, I do think, it is something to do with that, which makes her shrink from seeing any one; and when I told her Hartland had sent her his ‘good-bye,’ she seemed rather relieved than otherwise; only a little — perhaps a little—

disappointed ; but I don't know. One thing, however, she certainly did not ask to see him."

Not long after the young man's departure, the invalid was pronounced not only fit to be down-stairs and out of doors, but to contemplate the trip of which Lady Julia had spoken.

The project accordingly took shape with increased minuteness, and at length grew so alluring and so prominent, that a desire—an unmistakable desire—to partake in it, began to manifest itself on the part of Rosamund's sister.

Could she not be of use in helping to wait upon dear Rosamund? Could she not run about, and fetch and carry for her? Could she not save Aunt Julia trouble, write her letters, and talk French? Miss Penrose had always pronounced her to be the best French scholar in the family, and it would be such a pleasure to talk French for Aunt Julia.

Aunt Julia, however, was not to be tempted. Catharine might be very well at King's Common, and her notable qualities were of service

there as keeping all smooth during her sister's enforced absence—so much the good lady was ready to allow ; but beyond that, she had no love for her younger niece.

Had Rosamund indeed expressed a wish for her companionship—but Rosamund almost laughed at the suggestion. She and Catharine had never had an idea in common. To Lady Julia she would not now expose her sister, as in old times she had not spared to do, but neither was she going to give in to Catharine yet.

“If it had been Clemmy Stoneby !” she said, and almost before the words had crossed her lips, Clemmy Stoneby it was to be.

“My dear child, what an excellent, what a *first-rate* idea ! Of course, Clemmy is the very person. She must and shall come. She is devoted to you, and she,—I will pay all her expenses—everything. We owe so much to her dear, kind, invaluable brother. How thankful we should be to have such a young man for our parish clergyman ! And Clem-

entina herself will be quite perfect as a companion. Besides which, I cannot rejoice enough at having it in my power to give her the pleasure."

Poor little Clementina was in the seventh heaven when she had received Jack's consent, and all was arranged.

As for Catharine, she made no complaint. A few weeks after the party had started, they received a note from her, dated from the south of France. Dear papa was taking her the most delightful Continental tour; and she came home with her portmanteaus as full of new dresses, and knick-knacks, as a bride on her wedding-trip.

It was getting time for Rosamund to be at home again.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SHE HAS HAD HER LESSON.

“Adversity is like the period of the earlier and of the later rain—cold, comfortless, and unfriendly both to men and to animals;—yet from thence have their birth the flower and the fruit, the rose, the date, and the pomegranate.”—SCOTT.

At length the truants returned.

All alike had grown weary of endless novelty and unlimited idleness, and pined for the familiar sights and sounds, pursuits and pleasures, delights and even the drawbacks of an English home.

The spring and summer had been passed by Lady Julia and her niece in exploring Italian and Swiss resorts, wandering about from one grand old city to another, till the heat drove them northward; remaining there for some

months among the snow-peaks and glaciers ; and finally settling down at a German spa, until the life there became unendurable.

Lord Hartland had had a wider experience. He had travelled fast and far ; had seen many strange and stirring sights ; traversed mighty rivers ; camped out in lonely wildernesses ; made countless friends ; learned much, heard much, thrown his heart and sympathies abroad in all directions ; and had entered into every adventure and enterprise with a zest which had brought its own reward.

He was now, as predicted, another man. Moody, melancholy introspection was gone for ever. Unreasonable woe had vanished. The spring of life was all in bud afresh.

He still loved his cousin ; he still felt grief and shame with a chastened pang, when a wave of recollection would now and again break over his spirit as from some dead storm ; but, no longer crushed and overwhelmed, he now stood upright, strong to bear the past, and hopeful even of the future.

He would not shun Rosamund, but neither would he sue her.

He thought he could be sure that so far no thought of him as a lover had ever crossed her mind ; and if this were the case, a renewal of the old intercourse could be maintained without danger to either, so long as he kept a watch upon himself.

He did not mean to be too bold. Rosamund, according to her aunt, was now more beautiful, more bewitching than ever, and, added to that, the dearest, *dearest* girl in the world. "You can have no idea of the sensation she creates everywhere," wrote Lady Julia. "People are always getting introduced to her ; and then they are so angry with me because she refuses to go to their dances, and will not take any part in the amusements that are always going on. This is a very gay place, and there are plenty of pretty girls about, but none to equal Rosamund. So every one says. She cannot help being seen, for she is always out and about

—looking so lovely in her white frock and hat—and I may confess to *you* what I should not dare to do to *her*, that sometimes I am tempted to suggest going on the promenade and hearing a little music at the gay hour, because I cannot resist showing her off, and seeing all the eyes following us. But although she never objects to anything of that sort—(not the admiration, but the walking, and sitting under the trees)—she cannot be persuaded to more. She says she is not strong enough; and, to be sure, she is not *very* strong yet, not quite her old, robust self—but between ourselves, I do not feel that that is altogether the reason. I gather that she thinks she ought not to be amusing herself as other girls do, quite as if nothing had happened. Perhaps she is right, dear child; and it would be terrible if anything of the kind were to begin over again. It might, you know. There are one or two here, who are most obvious adorers from afar; and who would need only the slightest encouragement

to be at her feet. It is pretty to see how she avoids them, and yet how anxious she is to be kind to all, and never to hurt nor pain anybody. Oh, Hartland, our darling has had a sore and bitter lesson, but the fruits of it are only too sweet. I almost tremble when I think how dear, how very dear she is to me."

Next it was, "Rosamund and I are at last setting off for England. We shall travel slowly, and probably remain a day or two in London, although no one is there now. But Rosamund wishes to get some autumn things for the children, and to see about a new governess."

Rosamund might have spared her pains. She was informed that the children had all been fitted out before she arrived, and Catharine, armed with her father's authority, had already engaged a French mademoiselle, recommended by some of her new acquaintances.

"We did not know when to expect you," she explained subsequently, "and papa thought it a pity to wait. Lady Belmont assured

me it was quite a chance that Mademoiselle Forestier was disengaged ; so papa said, write at once."

"Who is Lady Belmount?" demanded the elder sister, with something of an accent on the "who."

"Papa and I met her in Paris. She was so kind to us. We saw a great deal of her there."

"I thought you had only been in Paris for a few days?"

"We saw her on nearly all of them."

"Is she your only reference for this French girl?"

"Certainly," said Catharine, drawing herself up. "Papa and I felt that we did not require any other. We were quite satisfied."

Quite satisfied ! Sixteen and three-quarters was quite satisfied ! Yet in spite of herself, the cold composure in the speaker's eye made the spirit of the other sink. She had no heart for wars and fighting, she was so longing for peace, and love, and kindness, all round ; so

anxious to be just and forbearing even to Catharine, who must ever be a trial and perplexity, that it did seem hard to be confronted with so grave an offence on the very threshold of her return.

But little did she guess how far things had gone !

Now, at every turn, she found herself being informed of new habits, new customs, new laws—all, as could plainly be perceived, of one person's making, yet none of which were owned by her. Oh dear, no ; it was papa who "liked this" ; papa who had "grown accustomed to that" ; papa who "*never* did" such and such a thing now, or who, contrariwise, "*always* did" it.

Papa showed Catharine his letters. Papa expected her in the library after breakfast. Papa could not spare her to do any lessons, so they had never been resumed. She had had to be everything to papa for so long, that he could not now do without her. It is to be feared that the very sound of

papa's name grew at last obnoxious in poor Rosamund's ears.

By degrees she saw it all. The younger had supplanted the elder, and taken away her birthright,—and though it must in fairness be added that the birthright in question was one which the latter would never for its own sake have coveted, still she could not stand by and look on, without something of the old, warm blood boiling within.

She had come home fancying that it would never boil again. She had been feeling so humble, so peaceful, so anxious by meek and gentle ways to show her sense of past folly, and resolutions for future amendment: she had felt as if nothing that might be said of her would be too severe, as if the coldness of friends, the condemnation of the world, and the stares of the village folks, would be only her meet punishment,—and had by reflection and prayer strengthened her soul to bear all.

But this peculiar form of retribution was precisely what had not been expected.

It must be remembered that the Catharine known to Rosamund in days gone by, had been but a poor creature ; at whom she had been used to laugh and flout when a child, and turn her back upon when a woman. In no other character had she beheld her sister, until now. During her convalescence, caresses, inquiries, and profuse solicitude had been the order of the day ; while not a word had been said to her of the triumphal progress the emancipated school-room miss was making to the top of the tree. All had been carefully kept in the background ; and now the grand result of the whole broke over the head of the returned wanderer, like a thunderclap. Catherine was all in all.

Mr Liscard, no longer a cipher, but applauded, flattered, and put forward, was by no means inclined to think meanly of any one who gave him such an excellent opinion of himself. Catharine's judgment—since it invariably coincided with his own—was eagerly sought, and pronounced invaluable. He and Catharine could manage everything between

them ; and perhaps it was but natural that he should add peevishly, that Rosamund had no business to interfere.

“ But it is about the children that I mind most,” the latter confided to her aunt. “ I did so hope to do better for my poor little sisters and brothers than was—was done for me. I may say that to you, may I not ? You will understand. But this Mademoiselle Forestier is not the right person for them at all ; and yet she is so backed up by papa and Catharine that I can do nothing. They are too strong for me,” and Rosamund’s lip trembled.

“ Too strong for my Rosamund ! ” said her aunt, gaily. “ Nay, my darling, be patient, and do your best. These trials often pass quickly. And you are the eldest daughter—mistress of your father’s house——”

——“ Neither of these now,” said Rosamund, sadly. “ I have forfeited my claim to everything, I think. My father almost tells me so. Catharine openly shows it. Even the little Frenchwoman follows their lead. As Cath-

arine engaged her and received her, she all but declines to take so much as a message from any one else. The other day when I spoke about something I wished to have altered, she looked at me calmly, and said, ‘Et Made-moiselle Catharine?’”

“You should speak to your father.”

“I have. It did no good.”

She did not add that it had done harm,—that Mr Liscard had testily rejoined that really it was a pity she had come home to disturb every one; and that, as she had been so happy with her aunt, he should recommend her continuing to make the Abbey her home, and leaving them to their own quiet ways.

The cruel taunt had pierced deeply, and could be breathed to no one.

Her place, whether for good or ill, was now, Rosamund felt, beneath her parent’s roof; and though many if not most of her days were spent with Lady Julia, she made a rule of carefully returning every night, and pursuing

her quiet round, as though settling down at King's Common for years to come.

This had gone on for some weeks, when one fine September morning Hartland, bronzed, reddened, big, bright, and hearty, re-appeared like a great sun rising on the neighbourhood.

He had been missed by all, and by none more than his young cousins; and their tumultuous greetings and demonstrations—for they had their first sight of his tall figure approaching through the park, while at play there in a holiday hour—acted as a sort of shield for the meeting which had been alike longed for and dreaded by two of the group.

Rosamund had been sitting a little apart; the day was warm, and there was but a faint tint in her cheeks. He thought she did not look as well as he had expected, and that the little hand which rested for a moment in his, felt small and thin. He told his aunt afterwards that, in his opinion, his cousin had a good deal of leeway yet to make up,

ere she could regain what she had lost. He told himself that he had done very well; got over the first sight of her bravely; and could feel confidence in his hold over his heart for the future.

Foolhardy mortal! Lady Julia needed not to have sighed so dolefully as he left the room—nor Catharine to have simpered and bridled, and been sure that Hartland had come home more delightful than ever, because he had addressed to her the chief part of his travel talk. The old spell was at work again before any of them knew—before he knew himself.

First of all recommenced the old habit of walking in and out of King's Common at all hours and seasons; then there would be long lingerings in the dusk, when by chance Rosamund was met in the gardens, or shrubberies; long talks in the bay-window, waiting for the driving party, who, it not infrequently happened, would be late in coming back—(Catharine liking much to look in for her tea

at this house and the other in the neighbourhood)—and instant recollections of Lady Julia's waiting for him, and speedy departure, immediately the room filled.

To be sure, the cousins were not quite so easy together as they had used to be; and instead of boldly claiming her company for a stroll, as he had been wont to do, Hartland must needs now manœuvre to get it, and look black, and say not a word, if frustrated. He would not say openly "Two's company, three's none," as he had not scrupled to do the year before, when desirous of getting rid of Catharine, who was no more a favourite with him than with her sister—but he would hearken diligently to any plans let fall, and base his line of operations accordingly.

Catharine used to wonder how it was that they had invariably missed him, when she and her father had been out on one of their long afternoon excursions. At such times he would be over early, and he would stay late. He would not quit the side of her whom he had

come to see—no, not for a moment. Out of doors, if a child ran up and pressed between them, he would lift it aside ; within, whatever seat she took, he would draw his near. As the time passed, he would press still closer, take an interest in the book she had been reading, the work she had been doing, in anything that enabled him to lean over her chair, and make her turn her head his way.

His voice would be low and soft ; he would halt before her name,—and yet the name would be oftener on his lips than perhaps it should have been. He did not talk to Rosamund about his travels, and his new friends, and new experiences, as he did to Catharine or to Dolly,—it seemed as if he had nothing to say about them to this other auditor—as if for her he had her own topics.

And when the long, dreamy, desultory *tête-à-tête* would at last be rudely broken in upon by the return of the driving party, noisy and merry, the Hartland who rose and straightened himself up, at their approach, would be quite

another person than Rosamund's companion in the low chair, during the past hour or two.

He would seldom be induced to stop on.

An evening at King's Common meant not only being usurped by one or other of the two who had no attractions for him, but a growing indignation on another's behoof. But little perception was needed to understand how matters stood in the re-adjusted household, and, guided by Lady Julia, he could hardly go wrong. He felt dangerous on the subject, and being a peaceable man, thought it best to avoid explosive opportunities.

But he got to know better and better at what times Rosamund would be alone, and the spots she haunted,—and I fear me he somewhat avoided his friend Jack Stoneby at this time—good cause as he had to love and bless Jack.

Stoneby, of course, saw plainly enough what was coming, and was not, upon the whole, certain of what he himself desired.

He desired Hartland's happiness, and Rosamund's happiness—and what with time and

absence, and the never having had any hopes for himself, joined to the advent of a very nice, and pretty, and amiable young lady in the neighbourhood, he was able quite cheerfully to unite the two in his mind—but he did feel he should have liked to have had some sign from Gilbert first.

For some weeks after Gilbert's departure, while Rosamund still lay hovering between life and death, Stoneby had conscientiously fulfilled his promise of letting her former lover know her state, and had duly received a few words of thanks in reply to each communication. From these he had learned that Major Gilbert had exchanged into a regiment ordered to Burmah, and the last note received from him had been from the frontier there.

There he was, and there he was likely to be for long enough—doing a little fighting, and running odds and ends of risks ; but the great war for which his soul thirsted was nowhere to be found. The world was unusually quiet a dozen years ago.

“I wish he could see some action,” said Jack to himself, as he folded up the latest missive—“it would do Gilbert more good than anything; and perhaps if that were to intervene between him and his past disappointment, what with activity and hard work, and all the things he would have to think of and to do, he would learn to judge more kindly of poor Hartland, and be able to send him a message. The worst of it is, that I fear the whole thing will slip from his memory. These sort of affairs take so little hold of a man engaged in active life; and he will naturally not care to recall this more than he can help. He may have got somebody else by this time,” added the young man, with a little nod to himself—and he went and paid a visit to his “somebody else,” that very afternoon.

It was a mild, showery day, almost too warm for the time of year, and with no suggestion of the blustering autumn winds yet in store.

Rosamund, wandering about among the late

roses in the old, unfashionable rosery at the bottom of the garden, was hidden from view between the tall briary hedges, and somewhat sharply taxed for being so by Catharine, who at four o'clock came to seek her, post-bag in hand.

"You knew the afternoon post would be coming in," she said. "It is too bad of you to give me all this run after you."

"I never asked you to run after me;" and the speaker's tone added, "nor did I want you to do it."

"I supposed you would like to have your letters?"

"You supposed you would like to know what was in them." Rosamund could yet turn the tables in a neat retort, and, truth to tell, she did not allow herself to get altogether out of practice. She did not care in the slightest degree about her letters that day, and she did care about being left to her rose-garden solitude, and perhaps just a little also about another interruption to it which had now and again

happened before, and which might as likely as not happen again,—but which Catharine's presence would inevitably mar. "I don't suppose they are of any consequence," she added, holding out an ungracious hand.

"Oh, but they are—at least, they are very interesting to look at from the outside," said Catharine, prudently waiving further discussion, and the risk of a quarrel, for the sake of gratifying her curiosity. "They look like invitations."

They were invitations. The October shooting dinner-parties were now being arranged, and people generally were beginning to think that King's Common had done its part in the way of mourning and retirement, and that the widower was ready to be consoled, or at any rate to be beguiled, by the seductions of a little neighbourly society.

One and all had concluded that at any rate he might be tried; and that Rosamund also might be tried.

It was said that she did not mean to go out

—that would be ridiculous. Every one knew that the poor girl had suffered enough; and she was so young, and had been so neglected —(poor Lady Caroline!)—that it would be cruel to visit her sins heavily on her head.

And undoubtedly there would be also something interesting in Rosamund Liscard just now, which would add to her attractions in the eyes of all who heard her story,—something to whisper about and nod about,—something to make a hostess grateful for. So that, considering how seldom it is that a poor county lady, buried in respectability and domestic interests, has even the faintest flavour of spice to throw into her ingredients for a shooting dinner-party, the writers of the several gilt-edged notes which Catharine now eagerly produced, may be pardoned if they were a little early in the day in sending them, and a little anxious about their acceptance.

“Mr and Miss Liscard,” read out she, enviously, as they were opened one by one. “I suppose you will go? I could hardly go till

next spring, unless—I shall be seventeen, you know, directly ; so that if you——”

“There, take them ! They are all of the same order,” cried her sister, hastily thrusting the packet back upon her. “You can ask papa about them. Ask him now, if you like. He is at home——”

——“No, he is not ; he is gone for his walk.”

“He went in this minute,—I saw him. He had forgotten a letter he had to write.”

“And what am I to ask him ?”

“About these, of course,” impatiently. “What is to be done about them ? I think myself that it is too soon for us to dine out yet. I think we,—or at any rate *he*, ought to let a year pass ; but I will do as he wishes.”

“I *could* go, you know, if you——”

“Well, go then,—you may go for me——”

“Do you really mean that ? May I consult with papa——?”

“Yes, consult with papa—go in now and consult with him—oh, that will do,” as Cath-

arine's mouth was opening to begin again,—
“I tell you, you may go if you want; only
do not stand arguing and expounding there
——” the words were scarcely out of her lips,
ere their astonished auditor, in terror of a re-
vocation, and already conning over the means
by which she could with propriety carry out
so delightful a permission (she told herself she
did not mind in the least Rosamund's being
cross over it), sped off like the wind, and the
latter's end was attained.

She was alone; and only a large black-edged
envelope remained in her hand, which neither
the one sister, nor the other, dreamed could
contain anything worth any one's waiting
for.

It was probably some milliner's or dress-
maker's bill; and the person chiefly interested
in these, did not covet over-much being present
when one of them came in. Catharine's spring
orders had been tolerably extensive, and had
somewhat startled even herself by the sum-total
to which they had mounted,—she would not, on

account of some tiresome shopwoman, delay seeking out dear papa, and telling him what Rosamund had said—(it was a way of this young diplomatist's always to father a sentiment of her own on somebody else when possible)—and accordingly, she was well out of sight ere the other absently undid the fastenings of the despised document.

The next moment saw it despised no longer.

“Emily Gilbert!” she exclaimed aloud, as the signature in large letters caught her eye, —“Emily Gilbert! And writing to me! What is it—what can it be?”

With feverish haste her eye flew over the page, and the blood seemed to surge back from her heart.

He was dead—the man who had loved and lost her.

Dead! She paused to think, to understand. Dead! How dead? *Dead!* Yes, the words were there, unmistakably there.

He had been killed in a night-sortie among the frontier mountains, some weeks before.

Some weeks before ! And she — she had never heard, had never been told, and had been going on her way, contented and happy ; —even beginning to—to—her cheek burned all over with a deep crimson flush.

Gilbert dead—some time dead—and she had not even mourned him !

That, for a few moments, swallowed up every other thought and emotion.

But how had she not heard — how not known ?

The writer explained that only now had her poor brother's effects arrived at his sorrowing home ; and that she thought it probable Miss Liscard had not noticed the record of his death in the newspapers, there having been a mistake in the name which no one had cared to rectify till too late. She now only intruded, poor Emily wrote—a mournful indignation shadowing itself forth beneath the humility—she only intruded because the enclosed had been found among her brother's papers. As the enclosed had been addressed

to Miss Liscard, she had felt that Miss Liscard would like to have it, or that at least they ought to send it.

In the whole there was a pitiful attempt at dignity which was hardly successful. Just where the brother would have succeeded, the sister failed.

Rosamund, however, was in no mood to carp. The strange, sudden, terrible tidings were enough ; the little packet with her name upon it in writing once so familiar—could she have eyes for aught beside ?

The paper had a dark-red stain upon it.

“ Dear,” it ran, “ I feel to-night, although I know not why, as if I must write one word to you for the last—last time. I had never meant that you should hear from me again ; but neither will you, unless the strange forebodings which have haunted me so unceasingly of late, prove to be true. I will bear this in my bosom, and only by my death shall it find its way to you. It may be a weak fancy, Rosamund, but I seem to feel that the

end is coming at last, and coming soon. I have not sought death, but neither have I shunned it. I have hoped for it, and expected it, and I think I shall have it, perhaps before many hours are over. There has been an outbreak among the natives here, and who knows to what extent the mischief may not have spread? It is a wild, dark night, and we are going out upon the hills in search of the rebels. They tell me these rebels give no quarter. Why should they? We give them none. . . . Oh, Rosamund, Rosamund, why are you with me, day and night, day and night now? I am looking at you as I write. I see you standing there in the dim light. I hear your voice; I almost feel your breath. Where are you? I wonder what you are doing. I wonder if you are happy. My dear, if my love would have made you so, you had it all—you have it now: whether I live or die, I am yours only, and yours wholly. But mine was not enough. Be Hartland's wife then, if you can love him.

I know he loves you. Marry him, and remember that this is what I wish and desire. I no longer doubt him; I feel convinced that I never ought to have doubted him, and you must tell him so,—when he tells you, as he will, what once I felt. I have written to him a few words also. He may like to have them straight from me. Why need I mind saying more? I shall have left this world if your eye ever falls upon these pages, and why should I not tell you that I humbly hope I shall have left it for a better? Rosamund, by the grace of God the ruin of my earthly happiness has been the means of leading me to seek it from a higher source. I turned to my Maker, and He heard me, and will receive me. May He bless you, preserve you, keep you, make you happy here and hereafter——” The writing ended in a pale smear: a summons had come in haste, and the hand that had dropped the pen, had lain stiff and powerless ere the morrow’s light had dawned.

The paper had been thrust into his bosom,

as he had said, and had been there—the dark stain told when.

With bursting sighs and blinding tears she hung over the page, at times invisible and almost incomprehensible. How often had she wondered what would be the end?—What the years would bring?—Whether he would forget?—Would suffer his wound to be gently healed?—Would ever again cross her path?

And now in that far-off clime he had fallen—not gloriously as in the field, leading his men to victory with the sound of trumpet and the clang of arms,—but in some dismal, unknown spot, nameless and unhonoured. To this, she cried—to this her hand had driven him! Great Heaven! was she never to come to the end of that harvest of her thoughtless sowing?

True, his sorrow had brought him a rich return, but in that she had had no share. The one had been of her making, but not the other; and can we blame her if at the moment this was the pang that was uppermost?

A step upon the gravel—a voice in her ear. “I think,” said a man’s deep undertone, subdued to tenderness unmistakable—“I think, Rosamund, that we have both heard the same tidings. . . . Shall I show you mine?” But she scarcely knew whether his arm enfolded her, or whether she clung to him; whether he or she held the new letter; or whether she read with his eyes or her own.

“You are a man of honour,” it ran. “If I ever tried to doubt it, time and reflection have proved too strong for me. But I think I always believed in you, Lord Hartland—though it was a kind of opiate to my pain to resolve that I did not. To-night I go into action, and before going I shall write to Rosamund. Show her this. Win her if you can. Make her happy.”

The command had been obeyed on the instant.

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. . . “Have I made you happy?” said Hartland, a few years afterwards. “Have I

done all I ever hoped and vowed to do? Is there anything you desire, anything I can give you, anything that would make my Rosamund happier? What? There is? Speak, dearest—I can trust you. You have but to name your wish. You shall go where you will, do what you will——”

The answer came so low that he could scarcely catch it—

“I want to see his grave.”

A few words in conclusion about the other personages who have played their parts before our readers.

And first, for Lady Julia. Her cup was now full to the brim, and would have run and bubbled over, but for the little daily friction occasioned by the sight of Catharine reigning unchecked, and in all her glory, at King’s Common. Had she known how long that reign was to last—extending until the very sight of her name as Miss Liscard became odious in the eyes of the thin-visaged, sharp-

voiced spinster, suitor after suitor having been frightened away by her ill-concealed shrewishness, and the subjection of her only remaining parent—even Aunt Julia would have been satisfied. As it was, it was perhaps really as well that the good aunt had that crumpled rose-leaf, all the rest of her bed was so wondrous easy.

Rosamund, with a chastened spirit and nobler views of life, growing ever gentler and tenderer, while regaining yearly more and more of the radiance of her youth in the sunshine of such a home, was perhaps the first darling of her heart. But Hartland was a close second—and deserved it. He, too, could never show her affection enough.

Mr Liscard never re-entered the married state, getting on fairly well without a second wife,—though it was said of him that he never again had so good a time, as during that first year of his widowhood, and more especially during the three first months of it.

Mrs Waterfield, on hearing of Rosamund's new engagement, made no remark of any kind ; not choosing to animadvert ; and perhaps not feeling drawn towards exhibiting any very exuberant demonstrations of pleasure. Perhaps these could hardly have been expected of her. Diana was out, too, by this time.

Jack Stoneby married well and happily, but kept his secret — a secret of which neither Lord nor Lady Hartland ever had the slightest suspicion—to the end of his life.

Clementina also married, having found out that the next best thing to a devoted brother, is a devoted husband.

Billy Barley throve apace, and had to be incessantly watched and scolded, or he would have had a dip in the mill-dam again as regularly as the summer came round, in spite of his father's pride in pointing at him and saying, " Ay, it's nought but a corp that boy there o' ours would ha' been this day, if it hadn't been for one of the grandest gentlemen i' the land,

who's gone himself now—the Lord bless his memory!” . . .

It was said of Lady Hartland in after years, that nothing could be more beautiful and touching than the care with which she began to train her little troop of high-spirited sons and daughters, even from their cradles.

It was one of the rules of her life to mark and learn the character of each child ; to win the confidence of all ; and to give her own in return.

She never sought to master them by sheer dint of strength and will, nor to override them with the upper hand ; still less to provoke them by her prejudices and unreasonableness, to assert their crude and immature judgments in defiance of her own.

But what was perhaps more effectual than even this, was the humility and readiness with which, so soon as she found herself mistaken, or learned that she had been in error, Rosamund was willing to avow it.

Such example could not fail to have more effect than any amount of precept; and it is therefore not to be wondered at that the children of such a mother, though by no means likely to become either a tame or timid crew, were, on the other hand, tolerably sure never to draw upon themselves the epithet of A Stiff-necked Generation.

THE END.





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